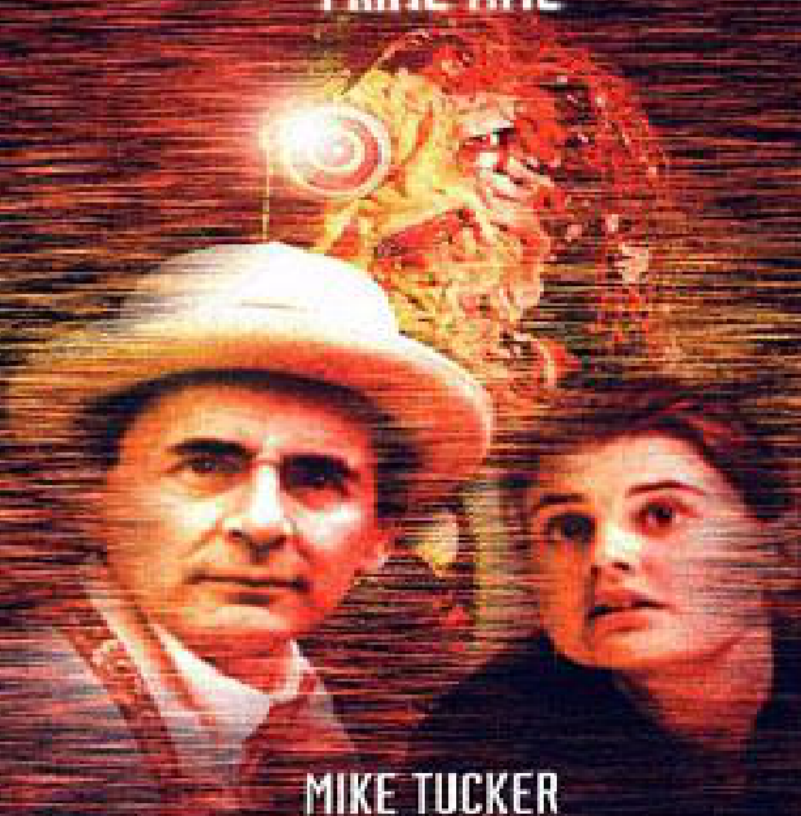


# DOCTOR WHO

PRIME TIME

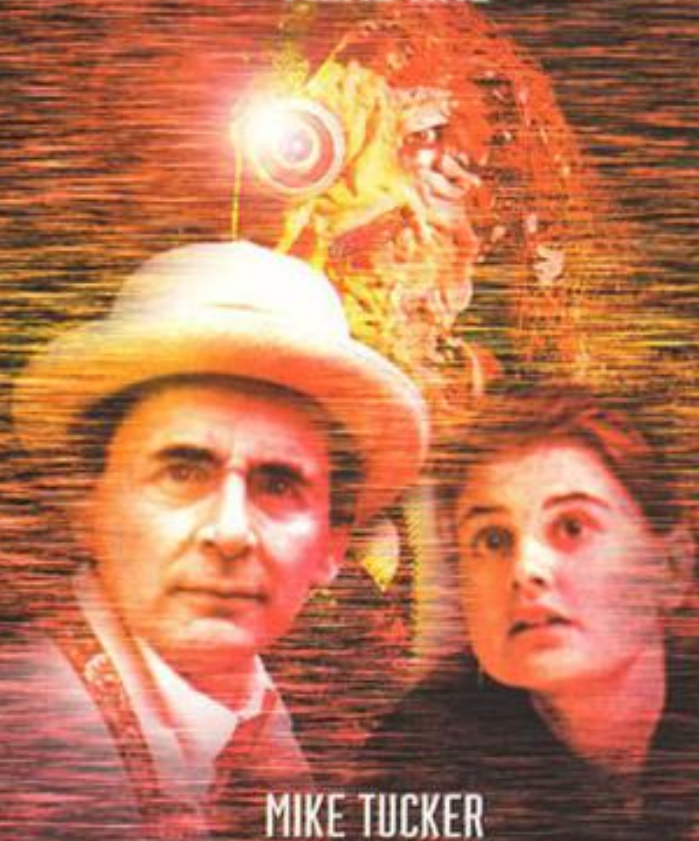


MIKE TUCKER

BBC

# DOCTOR WHO

PRIME TIME



MIKE TUCKER





*'Coming up after the break, the start of a new series of programmes featuring the mysterious traveller in Time and Space known only as – The Doctor.'*

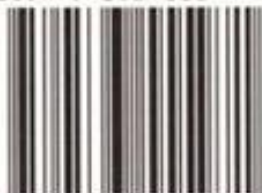
Detecting a mysterious sub-space signal in the Time Vortex, the Doctor and Ace land on the planet Blinni-Gaar. They soon discover that the native population are little more than zombies, addicted to the programmes of the dangerously powerful Channel 400. As the Doctor investigates, he finds that the television company has a sinister agenda that has nothing to do with entertainment.

Why is the Director-General of Channel 400 so interested in the Doctor? Who are the mysterious aliens who watch from the shadows of the Brago nebula? And why is a pack of Zzinbrüzi Jackals stalking the streets of Blinni-Gaar?

As the Doctor is drawn deeper and deeper into a web of intrigue and deceit he discovers that he has an unexpected ally of the most dangerous kind.

*Featuring the Seventh Doctor and Ace, this story takes place after the BBC Doctor-Who novel STORM HARVEST.*

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# DOCTOR WHO



PRIME TIME

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Mackays of Chatham Cover  
printed by Belmont Press Ltd, Northampton FOR:

Sophie and Sylvester

(without whom... )

Robert

(at last the fledgling flies the coop... ) Heather

(for opening a nice new chapter... )

Thanks to:

Steve Cole & Sue Cowley (the Fleshsmith team), Justin Richards, Jac Rayner, Rachel Brown, Andy (Baz) Tucker; Mum, Mark Morris & family, Angela & Martin, and Gary Russell & the Big Finish Crew.

Fleshsmith depicted on the cover designed and built by Mike Tucker.

Make-up by Sue Cowley.

Fleshsmith played by Steve Cole.

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Fog curled around the Doctor's legs in writhing, snake-like coils. He stepped forward gingerly, feet slipping on the mud-slick ground of the graveyard.

An owl hooted in the distance and the Doctor craned his neck back, peering into the gloom. The TARDIS lurked in the mist, a black coffin shape in the shadows. Shivering, the Doctor continued forward, twigs and dead leaves crackling underfoot.

He almost tripped over the gravestone. It suddenly loomed from the heavy clouds.

The Doctor stopped, staring. Then he heaved the shovel from his shoulder and started to dig.

[Pre-title Sequence](#)

The two brightly plumed eagles soared in elegant circles, drifting higher and higher as they caught the thermals rising off the mountain side. Ace watched them as they spiralled lazily into the morning air, shielding her eyes against the sun.

Suddenly the eagles swooped away, rocketing down the mountain, becoming tiny dots against the distant patchwork of the countryside.

Ace grinned and flicked a stray strand of hair out of her eyes. The eagles had been tracking her since she started her climb. They must have got used to her. Or got hungry.

Her headset crackled into life.

‘Are you going to hang there all day looking at the wildlife, or are you going to attempt this overhang?’

‘OK, Gatti, OK.’ Ace adjusted her grip, digging the points of her boots into the tiny crevasses on the rock face. Gatti was right, damn her. She shouldn’t be so easily distracted. There were easier ways of getting killed.

She stared down the rock face. There was a glint of light from the base of the mountain. Gatti. Watching her progress.

Those damn power-zoom viewers of hers were good. Gatti had already been critical of her technique on several occasions –

and with good reason. Ace was well out of practice. She twisted back to the rock face. She had known that this was going to be the most difficult part of the climb. From the ground it had looked easy enough, but now that she was here...

The surface was like glass. Barely any handholds at all.

She craned her neck. The plateau was tantalisingly close, but the overhang was going to be tricky.

Ace shifted her position and stretched her head back, looking for the outcrop she had spotted from the ground.

There. To her right.

She clipped her harness on to the rope in front of her and reached back for her piton gun. The metal of the handgrip was hot against her palm, heated by the blazing sun. She hefted it to her shoulder,

threaded her rope through the barrel and sighted it along the rock wall. She pulled the trigger and there was a satisfying whine as the power pack spun into life.

Ace smiled with satisfaction as a piton appeared in the rock over by the crevasse. The Doctor was a genius. A transmat piton gun. The metal spikes all stored in a reservoir at base camp, the rope beamed through as the piton materialised.

The Doctor had knocked it up in a spare moment on Coralee.

A belated birthday present. She smiled. He had even baked her a cake in the TARDIS's antiquated kitchen. That *had* been a surprise. She had all but forgotten about celebrating her birthdays. Time seemed to rush past so quickly. Coralee was already a distant memory. They had been though so much since then. Daleks on Kar-Charrat. The Venddon war. Voord.

She shook her head. She was getting distracted again, and at eight thousand feet that wasn't healthy.

She slid the piton gun back into its harness and snapped it home, then clipped herself on to the new line, tugging on it, checking it was secure.

Taking a deep breath Ace unclipped herself from the rock wall and pushed herself out over the abyss.

The rock face swept past her as she swung herself back, pushing out further each time. Her boots kicked off the surface and she swung out towards the crevasse. Her hand stretched out for a handhold. Almost. One more swing.

Air rushed past her and her hair streamed out behind her as she swung back again. Then her hands grasped hard rock and

she pulled herself into the crevasse.

Ace whooped with delight. Her headset crackled into life again. 'Well done. You should be able to get up on to the plateau easily now. Have a breather.'

Ace was breathless with excitement. 'OK Gatti. I'll call when I'm ready to go on.'

She clambered up the last few feet towards the plateau laughing out



loud.

She hauled herself up the last few feet of rockface and on to the plateau.

A familiar voice suddenly drifted through the crisp air.

‘Is all that noise really necessary? Some of us are trying to sleep up here.’

Ace stopped in disbelief, then smiled. The Doctor. Just when you least expected him...

The Doctor sat at a small picnic table, straw hat perched on his untidy mess of hair, teapot and china cups laid out in front of him. He held out a small plate. ‘Kendal mint cake?’

I’m told it’s what all the best climbers eat.’

Ace sauntered over and dropped into a chair, taking a slab of mintcake. ‘Thanks, Professor.’ She peered around, looking for the TARDIS. ‘How did you get up here, climb?’

The Doctor frowned and shook his head. ‘Oh no. That would be far too undignified. I flew.’

Ace gave him a look over the top of her sunglasses. The Doctor just beamed at her. Deciding that she wasn’t going to enquire any further, she reached for a teacup.

The two of them sat in silence staring at the landscape stretching away from them. The mountains on the far side of the valley had snow at their summits, glinting under the high sun. Below them lush fields stretched away in an elaborate geometric patchwork, greens and yellows chequering the valley floor. The tower-block sized agricultural processors were little more than children’s toys from this height, lumbering sedately across the landscape.

Ace sipped at her tea and peered across at the mountains.

‘What do you think?’

The Doctor was staring at her. Ace shrugged. ‘After the climbs that Gatti’s put me through over the last day or two it should be a doddle, Professor.’

The Doctor nodded slowly. ‘Good.’

Ace turned to him. 'I still don't understand why we can't just use the TARDIS.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Let's just say I would rather be cautious in this instance.' He pulled a pair of opera glasses out of his pocket and peered through them.

Ace frowned. The Doctor was keeping things to himself.

She had barely seen him over the last few days. He kept sneaking off in the TARDIS without any explanation of where he was going and she didn't like it.

They were a team. They'd been working well together over the last few months. This mysterious, uncommunicative Doctor was seriously beginning to nark her.

She was about to bring this up with him when her communicator beeped into life.

'Right. You've had a long enough break. You've still got a couple of hours before you reach the summit.'

Ace pulled on her headset.

'You're a hard woman, Gatti.'

'Damn right! So get to it.'

Ace drained the last of her tea and hoisted her rucksack back on to her shoulders.

The Doctor peered at her from under the brim of his hat.

'Do you think that we're about ready?'

Ace nodded.

'I'm up for it if you are, Professor.'

The Doctor tapped his lips thoughtfully. 'Then I can't see any reason to delay. We'll go in tonight.' He leant back in his chair, 'If you're not going to be too tired, that is.'

Ace grinned. 'Raring to go as always, Professor.'

Her communicator buzzed again, Gatti's impatient voice in her ear.

Ace crossed the plateau and began to scramble up the far wall. The first part of the slope was gentle and she climbed quickly. She peered back down at the plateau, but the picnic table – and the Doctor – had gone.

## Part One

### Chapter One

In the swirling dimensional maelstrom that is the time vortex, a tiny shape tumbled and span, lost amongst the impossible currents of past, present and future as they spiralled backwards and forwards through infinity. The lamp on its roof blinking in sedate rhythm, the TARDIS rolled and pitched, driven by the time winds, its deep blue surface sparkling as the time eddies swirled around it.

Inside the TARDIS the glass cylinder of the time rotor rose and fell steadily, keeping time with the throb of the engines buried deep within the ship. The console room was lit by a deep warm glow, the deep round indentations that peppered the walls shining with a soft inner light.

The Doctor sat in a high-backed chair in the corner of the control room, reading. Books, bits of electronics and furniture from a variety of periods and planets lay scattered untidily around him. An elaborate train set wound around the legs of his chair, vanishing through an open door into the depths of the time machine. With a toot of whistles a model of the Flying Scotsman appeared through the doorway, clattered around the console room and vanished again.

The Doctor put down his book, checked his pocket watch and beamed. 'Right on time.'

He turned another page of his book and reached for the tall elegant wineglass that sat on a small chess table next to him.

He took a sip of the sea-green wine and gave a deep sigh of contentment. Coralee wine kept well. He'd been keeping it for a special occasion, and the last few days had been so quiet that he'd actually had a chance to cook dinner for himself and Ace.

He cocked his head on one side. He could hear music drifting from the open door. Ace was in the gym, he could hear her singing to herself.

He settled back in his chair and started reading again. It was rare that he got the chance to get so relaxed, rare that he got the chance to

spend any time at home. A smile drifted across his face. He placed the book on his lap and let his gaze wander around the console room.

Home.

He couldn't imagine ever living anywhere else. He had always referred to his stolen time machine as home, but it was only since his tussle with the Master in Perivale – only since the planet of the Cheetah people – that he had really *believed* it. Not the TARDIS. Not the Ship. Home.

He closed his eyes, listening to the hundreds of thousands of sounds that the console made. He knew every one of them, could tell in a moment if there was something wrong.

A sudden frown crossed his brow.

There *was* an unfamiliar sound. Not from the TARDIS, nothing wrong, but...

Putting his wineglass down the Doctor pulled himself out of his chair and crossed to the console. His hands darted over the controls. He examined a read-out, then pressed his ear to a small speaker grille.

He straightened.

‘Odd.’

Making a sudden decision the Doctor scampered around the hexagonal control column and began punching at controls, dropping the TARDIS out of the vortex.

The hum of the control room changed in pitch and the Doctor crossed back to the speaker grille, listening again.

‘Yes,’ he murmured to himself. ‘I was right.’

He reached for a switch and the scanner screen slid open with a soft hum. The Doctor adjusted another control and harsh synthesised music suddenly blared around the console room, deafeningly loud.

Clamping one hand over his ears the Doctor scrabbled desperately for the volume control. The music faded to a tolerable level. The Doctor stared at the screen, then adjusted some more instruments.

His eyes narrowed.

He gave a deep sigh, crossed back to his chair and slid an elegant leather bookmark into his book.

‘Ah well, it was too good to last.’

He placed the book on the chess table, crossed to the door, and bellowed into the gloom.

‘Ace!’

Ace was cycling at nearly forty miles an hour when she heard the Doctor calling her name. She let the bike coast to a halt, drawing in deep breaths of mountain air. She sat for a moment, drinking in the view, then slipped off the VR

headset. She clambered off the cycling machine and crossed the gym, pulling her towel from the rail on the wall and wrapping it around her neck. Her muscles throbbed pleasantly.

It had been a good work-out.

‘Ace!’

The Doctor’s voice drifted down from the console room again. Funny how she could always hear him no matter where she was in the TARDIS. Not that the reverse was true of course. Oh no. Once he vanished into the maze of corridors you could never find him. Not unless there was something interesting to look at. Then he had an uncanny knack of appearing in the console as if by magic. But if you wanted him to do the washing-up...

‘Ace, come and look at this!’

‘Coming, Professor.’

She began to jog towards the console room, padding softly through the pale TARDIS corridors. It always felt as though you were going uphill when you headed for the control room, nothing that you could measure, more of a feeling, but it always felt as though it was at the highest part of the ship.

She crossed the ivy-tangled square of the cloister room and increased her pace. Might as well keep her work-out going to the bitter end.

The door of the control room appeared at the end of the corridor, and suddenly the model of the Flying Scotsman appeared at her feet.

Keeping pace with it Ace sprinted towards the doorway.

She and the train burst into the control room at the same time, the model letting out a triumphant whistle.

The Doctor looked at her, eyebrows raised. 'I hope you've got a ticket.'

Ace nodded, 'First class.' She slumped into one of the chairs. 'What's up, Professor?'

The Doctor nodded at the scanner screen, and twisted a dial on the console.

Laughter and cheering and brash synthesiser music blared from the speakers. Ace clamped her hands over her ears.

'Bloody hell, Professor!'

The music ended with a crash of cymbals and a large man, his face plastered with make-up, his suit garish and glittery, loomed into view.

*'Thank you, folks, thank you! You're back with Roderik Saarl, live on Channel 400, broadcasting throughout the galaxy, bringing you the best in news, views and top-class entertainment! Tonight we investigate the increasing problems of Ogrons. On every street corner, in every city on an increasing number of planets, innocent passers-by are being subjected to...'*

The Doctor cut off the sound and turned to look at her.

'Well?'

Ace rubbed at her ears. 'Well, what?'

'Did you notice anything strange, anything unusual?'

'Other than the colour of that man's face, you mean?'

The Doctor glared at her. 'Ace!'

'No, Professor! Nothing unusual! It's a television show, that's all, and not a very good one.'

The Doctor turned back to the console, adjusting controls, tapping his teeth, peering intently at the screen.

Ace pulled the towel from around her neck and began to rub at her hair. 'If you're going to watch TV then you can probably find



something a bit better than that. I thought documentaries would be more your thing, you know, nice wildlife programmes.'

The Doctor shot her a filthy look.

'I would hardly be scrutinising this...' he wagged his hands at the screen, 'This, entertainment, if I didn't have good reason. What has completely passed you by is the signal encoded in the transmission.'

He pressed another control and a faint oscillating whistle filled the console room.

Ace shook her head. 'So you've got lousy reception, Professor. Get your aerial fixed, or get rid of your digital box.'

The Doctor wasn't listening to her. He was hunched over the console, his eyes closed, listening to the whistle.

Ace sighed.

'I'm going to get changed, Professor.'

Slinging the towel over her shoulder Ace ambled out of the console room, following the corridor to her room. She smiled. The Doctor was perfectly at home with bizarre alien artefacts, but always seemed totally bemused by television.

Not that they ever got much chance to watch it. Come to think of it, Ace had never seen anything even resembling a TV set in the TARDIS. Not that you needed one, the TARDIS was equipped with an old-fashioned twenties-style cinema and the Doctor always took great delight in being the projectionist.

They had watched Jurassic Park the other night, the Doctor pointing out all the errors in the dinosaurs. Ace still hadn't persuaded him to take her back to prehistoric Earth. Perhaps it was about time she had another go.

Ace pushed open the door to her room and chucked her towel on to the untidy pile of clothes in the corner. She was growing out of most of them. Perhaps before they started traipsing around the Late Jurassic she should get him to take her to Oxford Street and do some shopping. She grinned. That would really piss him off. A time machine with the ability to go anywhere in time and space and she wanted to go shopping in Oxford Street.

The background hum of the TARDIS suddenly shifted in pitch, and a deep grinding, groaning roar began to build. They were landing!

The cornfields of Blinni-Gaar stretched on as if for ever, acre upon acre of yellow across the valley floor. The distant edges of the fields were lost in the shimmering blur of the heat haze, the distant mountains seemingly floating on a gently shifting sea of gold.

Agricultural processors lumbered across the landscape, huge and red, their drones echoing across the valley. The sound of their engines was suddenly joined by something else, something grating and harsh. Birds rose from their hiding places, screeching in alarm as the corn began to sway as if caught in a sudden breeze. Its stalks suddenly flattened into a perfect circle and with a last asthmatic gasp the TARDIS

appeared at their centre.

The door creaked open and Ace bundled out into the Sunlight. She stared around in irritation. 'Professor! You're miles from the city.' She squinted at the spires and tower blocks nestling at the far end of the valley. The Doctor emerged, tilting his hat forward to shield his eyes. 'Hmm. A little further than I intended, I admit.' He pulled the TARDIS

doors closed and swung his umbrella on to his shoulder.

'Come on, Ace. A bracing walk will do us both good.'

He set off through the field, the corn rippling in his wake.

With a deep sigh Ace set off after him.

The Channel 400 computer received the coded signal at 17.45

Blinni-Gaar time. Signal recognition software kicked in and the sound file was passed through to archive matching.

Fourteen nanoseconds later a buried subroutine suddenly came to life, crosschecking the mainframe's findings.

Exactly 3.2 seconds after the computer had received the initial signal, the phone on Vogol Lukos's desk rang.

'Yes, Auntie, what is it?'

Lukos was brusque. He had paperwork that was threatening to dominate his afternoon and wasn't in the mood to be interrupted by a pedantic computer.

+ SORRY TO DISTURB YOU, MR LUKOS, BUT THE

CLASSIFIED PROGRAMME SCENARIO IS NOW IN

EFFECT +

Lukos nearly dropped his drink.

‘What! Are you sure?’

+ AUDIO RECOGNITION PROTOCOLS INDICATE

THAT MATERIALISATION HAS OCCURRED. SOUND

FILES AND WAVE COMPARISON DATA ARE

AVAILABLE +

‘Relay to my office!’

Lukos leant back in his chair, eyes closed as the sound of the TARDIS’s materialisation echoed around him.

He smiled.

‘Contact the board of governors, Auntie. Tell them that I want them here at once.’

+ YES, MR LUKOS +

Lukos sat back, fingers steepled, a sly smile on his face.

Abruptly he leant forward, stabbing at a set of controls in front of him.

The surface of his desk shimmered as his videophone link activated, but the picture was nothing but static. Lukos scowled.

‘Roderik, activate your video feed.’

Nothing.

‘Saarl!’

The picture swam into life, Roderik Saarl’s sweating face filling the screen. He was red and breathless, Lukos caught a glimpse of naked shapes scurrying for cover in the background. ‘Disturbing something important, am I, Roderik?’

Something to look out for on the expense account?’

‘You know I always have a work-out after a studio,’ said Saarl defensively. ‘You were the one who suggested that I get a personal trainer.’

‘I counted three personal trainers. I had no idea that you were so dedicated.’

Saarl grinned unpleasantly. ‘Very. Now is this just a social call, Vogol?’

‘No, Roderik, my dear. I want you over here for a board meeting.’

‘Now?’

‘Yes, my dear, now. We have a very important new programme that needs discussion – an award winner, no less.

My spinner will be over to collect you in twenty minutes.’

Lukos snapped off the communicator, and the desk faded back to mahogany.

‘You are becoming far too expensive in your tastes, Roderik, my dear. Still, our new star may be easier to keep.’

He pulled himself from behind his desk and crossed the office. A complex telescope on a tripod loomed in the picture window overlooking the valley, cables trailing to a tower of recorders and monitors.

Lukos peered through the eyepiece. The windows of the apartment block on the other side of the valley were pin-sharp in the viewer. He gave a sigh of disappointment. What was the point of getting the most beautiful vid model in the system staying there if she was never at home. He swung the telescope towards the valley floor, filters cutting in to shade his eyes from the glare from the cornfields.

He scanned the fields for a few moments, sweeping back and forth, searching. ‘I know you’re out there somewhere,’ he murmured.

A harvester lumbered into view and Lukos tracked it for a while, then he straightened. ‘No matter, no matter. I’ll get to see you soon enough.’

He swung the telescope back to its original position. He was about to

shut it down when a movement on one of the monitors caught his eye.

A tall blonde in a low-cut dress had appeared in one of the windows, laden down with shopping bags. As Lukos watched she put down the bags, stretched and slid the straps of her dress from her shoulders.

‘Ah. A successful days shopping it seems. And now you will want to try your purchases on, no doubt.’

Lukos slid a chair over to the telescope and lowered himself into it.

‘Auntie.’

+ YES, MR LUKOS +

‘How long until the first of our illustrious board of governors arrives?’

+ 54 MINUTES, MR LUKOS +

‘Excellent.’ Lukos slipped a disk into one of the recorders and I ‘ant forward, eyes fixed on the telescope viewscreen.

‘Just enough time for me to watch one of my favourite programmes.’

## Chapter Two

Ace shrugged off her jacket and tied it around her waist. It was getting hot. The Doctor had grudgingly agreed to have a breather and she had settled down under the trees bordering the field. The city loomed closer now, spires and towers dominating the skyline. It was impressive she had to admit –

and it was still a long way off. A distant rumble of thunder reached her. There was a storm building.

She pulled another handful of berries from one of the bushes beside her and popped one into her mouth. The berries were about the size of grapes, but tasted like oranges. Ace had got quite addicted. A huge pile of them filled the Doctor’s hat.

She grimaced. The straw was getting stained with juice.

Something else for him to complain about.

She looked up to see where the Doctor was. He stood at the side of the cornfield studying something on the far side of the valley through his opera glasses. Ace tried to follow his gaze. There seemed to be a

building set into the mountainside, it was difficult to tell through the heat haze. She frowned. He was up to something, she was sure.

The sound of something crashing through the corn made her look up. One of the huge agricultural machines thundered past, blotting out the sun. Ace scrambled to her feet.

‘Blimey!’

‘Yes, they are impressive, aren’t they?’ The Doctor was at her side, peering up at it. ‘A Guldarian farming drone.’ He frowned. ‘The strange thing is that I can’t understand why it’s here. The Blinnati are superb farmers. They don’t need even one, let alone the dozens that we’ve seen.’

Ace craned her neck, shielding her eyes. ‘Are they manned?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘Totally robotic, preprogrammed...’

‘And going our way.’

The Doctor gave her a stern look.

‘Oh, come on, Professor. It’s quicker than walking. I’m tired and my hay fever is playing up.’

‘Whereas your appetite isn’t.’ The Doctor stared disapprovingly at the pile of berries in his hat.

Ace tipped the berries out and sheepishly handed it back to him.

The Doctor frowned at his juice-stained hat for a moment, then his face cracked into an enormous grin.

‘Well I’m sure that it’s very good for my hair! Come on.

Our lift is leaving without us.’

Cramming his hat on to his head he grabbed Ace by the hand and the two of them began haring through the cornfield after the ponderous farming robot.

Although the machine wasn’t fast it proved difficult to keep up with it, stalks of corn whipping at them with every step. Ace could see a small ladder set into one of the slab-like sides. The Doctor lunged forward, hooking the handle of his umbrella on to one of the rungs. He hauled himself up on to a small platform and reached back for her.



‘Give me your hand!’

Ace sprinted forward, reaching out for him. He grasped her wrist and pulled her up on to the metal gantry. The two of them lay panting for a moment, then the Doctor struggled to his feet.

‘The view should be better from the top deck.’

He clambered up a ladder and vanished over the top of the machine. Ace scrambled after him.

The top of the farming drone was a tangle of vents and grilles, and Ace could see the tops of huge blades whipping through the cornfield. There was a constant throb of machinery and a not unpleasant smell of engine oil.

The Doctor was at a railing at the front of the machine, peering through his opera glasses, looking for all the world like a sea captain at the prow of a ship. Ace joined him at the railing, breathing in the smell of cut grass and hay.

The city was spread out before them, an unbroken line of steel and concrete cutting across the valley.

‘What’s the plan, Professor? Are we going to be staying here for a while?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘I think so. I want to find out where the energy signal embedded in that TV transmission is coming from. Have a look at this.’

He handed her the opera glasses.

‘What am I looking for?’

The Doctor pointed. ‘Big building set into the hillside, on the far side of the valley.’

Ace pulled the glasses to her eyes and the building swam into focus, a jumble of concrete shapes nestling in the rock wall.

‘Looks normal enough, Professor. Long way to climb down if you want a pint of milk but...’

‘Look at the top, Ace.’ The Doctor waved his hands irritably. ‘The communications tower on the roof.’

Ace squinted at it. A tangle of dishes and aerials, stark against the sky.

‘So, they like their cable telly.’

‘Not a bad guess.’ The Doctor leant on the railing drumming his fingers on the handle of his umbrella. ‘It’s certainly a telecommunications transmitter of some kind, but there are features that I couldn’t even guess at on that tower.’

‘So what now?’

The Doctor pursed his lips. ‘I’m not sure. That signal could just be a mistake, but mistakes like that are quite hard to make.’ He sighed. ‘I rather think that we might have landed in the thick of things again.’

Ace laughed. ‘Just for a change you mean.’

The Doctor looked hurt. Ace patted him on the shoulder.

‘Cheer up, Professor. At least you never hear me complain that I’m getting bored.’

She untied her jacket and slumped back against a ventilator tower, watching the landscape drift by. It was like being on a boat, she thought, a boat on a waving golden sea.

The Doctor scurried back and forth, checking readings on his pocket watch, peering through his opera glasses.

The late afternoon sun was beginning to get oppressive, the storm threatening the valley now. Ace felt her eyelids begin to get heavy and, lulled by the low drone of the harvester, started to drift off to sleep.

Seconds later – or so it seemed to her – she was woken by the Doctor gently shaking her shoulder.

‘Ace!’

She peered up at him through bleary eyes. ‘Hmm?’

‘Time for us to get off, I’m afraid. I doubt that the population of Blinni-Gaar, would take kindly to finding bits of Ace in their breakfast cereal.’

Ace scrambled to her feet, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

The golden fields had been replaced by a harsh suburban landscape. Huge silos towered over them and the smell of cut grass had been replaced by fumes and smoke.

She peered over the side of the railing. The harvester was in a line with dozens of others, all of them manoeuvring into a huge hangar. She could hear the roar of heavy machinery.

‘Aren’t you worried about TARDIS-shaped cereal then?’

Ace asked.

‘No, no no.’ The Doctor ‘shook his head. ‘It will be months before those particular crops are ready to harvest.

Come along.’

The once-blue sky was thick with clouds now and, as Ace struggled into her jacket, she heard another rumble of thunder echo down the valley.

The Doctor was already off down one of the ladders. Ace clambered after him. She landed hard on the tarmac and sprinted over to where the Doctor was struggling with the clasp on his umbrella. Thick drops of rain were beginning to splash around them. The storm that had been threatening to break all afternoon had finally arrived.

Ace ducked under the umbrella, pulling her jacket around her. ‘Where now, Professor?’

The Doctor stuck a finger in the air, testing the wind. ‘This way!’

He set off through the towering machines. Ace clung on to his arm, vainly trying to shelter under the umbrella as, with a crash of thunder, the heavens opened.

As they splashed through ever-growing puddles the warehouses and factories of the industrial sector began to give way to more pleasant surroundings: wide, shop-filled roads, full of people and traffic. The Doctor and Ace ducked out of the way of a multiwheeled juggernaut as it thundered out of town barely dodging the deluge that it created.

The rain was coming down hard now, pouring from gutters and rooftops. The streets were alive with people ducking in and out of shopfronts, crowding under awnings and desperately trying to flag down one of the dozens of different forms of public transport that

drove, hovered or flew through the towering city.

Ace craned her neck, peering up through the raindrops.

She could barely see the tops of some of the skyscrapers –

even the smallest tower blocks would have put any American city to shame.

She grinned. It was nice to get somewhere civilised and busy. More often than not they ended up somewhere remote or deserted. Here the air was alive with noise and smells. People jostled past them, collars up, desperate to get somewhere warm. The wide pavements were a sea of umbrellas, some of them traditional like the Doctor's, others concealing generators for portable force fields that fizzed and crackled in the wet air.

Ace peered out into the road. The streets were a racetrack of different vehicles. Her eyes lit up as an elaborate bike hovered past, the rainwater turning to steam as it passed.

Every street corner seemed to have traffic signals topped with monitor screens. She could hear the babble of a dozen different channels over the sound of the traffic.

Cheesy synthesiser music made her look up. There was a screen in the wall above her. She recognised the rotund face of Roderik Saarl from the TARDIS. The camera held a shot of his grinning face, then the picture changed to a string of lightning-fast adverts. So fast they made her eyes ache. She shook her head.

‘Talk about subliminal advertising...’

The Doctor dragged her to one side as a taxi sped past, its horn blaring.

‘If we’re going to watch television then I think we’d better find somewhere to shelter for a while, don’t you?’ He had to raise his voice over the drumming of the rain.

‘OK, Professor, but can we go somewhere where we can eat, as well, all these smells are beginning to make me hungry.’

The Doctor prodded at her midriff with his finger. ‘I swear I don’t know where you put it all.’

Ace grinned. ‘Bigger on the inside.’

The Doctor peered through the crowds. ‘There doesn’t seem to be anything but clothes shops here, let’s try over by that theatre.’

Huddling together under the battered black umbrella they launched themselves into the melee of people and traffic.

Greg Ashby peered out through the rain-splattered windows at the tide of people sweeping past him. He shook his head.

‘Where the hell do they all come from?’

He took another sip of his coffee and grimaced. If there was one thing that they didn’t do well on Blinni-Gaar it was coffee. Spooning more sugar into his mug he peered around the cafe. It was busy, mostly locals, squinting at the dapped-out monitor screen above the bar. A few offworlders, but they just hunkered down over their meals, trying to shut out the constant babble from the televisions and the splash of rain in the gutters.

Greg sighed. It hadn’t been a good week. No work. No leads. No money. He had hoped that Blinni-Gaar would have been a godsend for entrepreneurs; it had been quite the reverse. Channel 400 had the planet sewn up tight. No inroads.

No scoops. He had hoped to get an opportunity to see Vogol Lukos, but hadn’t even managed to get past the main gate.

He peered down at the cases full of video equipment. How the hell was he ever going to payoff the loan on those? Why the hell hadn’t he stayed with IntraVenus – Dogbolter was a git, but at least he paid on time. Either stayed with IntraVenus or stayed with... her.

He shook his head angrily. It had been months since she had left him. He should be over her by now. Moping wasn’t his style.

His gaze drifted to his technician on the other side of the table. Mournful green eyes stared back at him. Typical. Only he would pick a Monteekan as a partner. Clever, there was no doubt about that, but the most miserable bastards in the universe.

‘You OK, Eeji Tek?’

The blue-skinned alien nodded.

Greg sighed. A species without the ability to smile. Just what he needed in his current mood.

He turned his gaze back to the rain-splattered street. A couple were struggling through the traffic. As Greg watched they dodged out of the way of one of the city trams and huddled outside under the awning, peering at the menu.

With a gentle tinkle of bells the door opened and the two bundled inside.

Greg cast an appreciative eye over the girl as she shook the water from her hair. She caught him staring and a glimmer of a smile flickered over her face, then she turned to the counter and began peering at the food laid out under the glass.

Greg smiled to himself. Perhaps the day wasn't a complete washout after all. He shifted his gaze to the man, who was wrestling with the umbrella in the doorway. It shut with a snap, flicking water all over the table near the door. The man held up his hands in apology, and began mopping the water off with a large paisley handkerchief.

Greg's brow furrowed. The man was familiar somehow.

He knew the face.

He leant back in his chair, trying to get a better look. The man suddenly looked him full in the face, his steel-grey eyes not blinking, then turned away and bustled over to where his companion was peering at the sandwiches.

Greg sat back in this chair, his heart pounding.

'Eeji Tek!' He hissed. 'The bloke at the counter, quickly.'

The Monteekan swivelled his head, compound eyes twinkling.

He shrugged. 'Human. Ugly, like you all. Special not.'

Why interest you?'

'I think it's the Doctor.' Greg hauled his holdall on to the table, rummaged through it and pulled out a data pad.

Eeji Tek swung his head back, puzzled.

'Doctor? Who Doctor?'



The pad hummed into life. 'I'll tell you in a minute. Move to one side, will you.'

Greg slid the pad across the table, pointing it across the cafe. The Doctor's face swam into view in the tiny monitor.

Greg thumbed a small stud and the machine pinged softly.

'Got him.' He pulled the pad close to his mouth. 'Data retrieval, all sources, cross-reference to picture archive.'

The machine clattered for a moment, then data began to scroll across the screen.

Greg punched the table in triumph. 'Knew it!'

Eeji Tek peered at the flickering screen.

'Why excited you, Ashby? How special little human is?'

Greg leant forward conspiratorially. 'This guy is big news Eeji, Remember the disaster on Coralee last year? He was the one who saved the colony. The Venddon peace treaty. Him.

The Dalek problem out on the rim. Him. Peladon, Inter Minor  
– you name it.'

Eeji Tek peered around again. 'Doesn't look much, he.'

'It gets better. According to the data he's been cropping up for centuries. No name, just calls himself the Doctor. I've pulled records from central as far back as the prespace era.'

The alien's blue face crinkled in puzzlement.

'Same man?'

Greg nodded. 'Just not the same body.' He snapped the pad shut. 'I think we may have a scoop Eeji.'

'What about girl?'

Greg shrugged. 'Assistant? Who knows.'

He looked up again. 'Here, he's moving. Looks like the girl's staying though.' Greg stuffed the pad back into his holdall and began to

struggle into his waterproof.

‘You hang about her, if she goes anywhere, follow her. I’ll try and tail him.’

Eeji Tek rolled his eyes and reached for his coffee.

‘Cheer up, Eeji.’ Greg was grinning like a man possessed.

‘I’ll make you rich yet.’

‘Professor!’

Ace put down her sandwich and glared up at the Doctor in irritation. He held his hands up, placating her.

‘I won’t be long, and it doesn’t make sense for both of us to be traipsing around in the rain. I’ll find us somewhere to stay, then come back and get you, all right?’

‘Yeah, I suppose so.’

‘Right. Won’t be long.’

Snatching up his umbrella from the door the Doctor vanished into the rain. Ace watched as his diminutive figure was swallowed up by the jostling crowds. She gave a deep sigh and took another bite of her sandwich. As always there were strange flavours mingled in with ones that she recognised. Food on alien planets was always something of a lottery with Ace. However much she enjoyed her lifestyle there were times when it would be nice to be back in a good old-fashioned pub eating pie and chips.

She settled back in her chair and took a swig of her drink.

Well, if she was going to be stuck here for a while she might as well make the most of it. She peered at the reflections in the glass, trying to catch a glimpse of the man who had smiled at her when she came in. As she did so he brushed past her, flashing her another smile as he vanished into the rain.

‘Damn,’ Ace hissed under her breath. She twisted around to look at the table where he had been sitting. A gangly blue-tinted alien stared back at her with mournful eyes. Ace slumped back into her chair, raising her glass to her reflection.

‘Cheers.’

The Doctor dodged through the tide of people, jacket pulled tight around him. He'd upset Ace. Not what he had intended, but he needed-a little time alone. She was the perfect companion in many ways, never complaining, rarely getting herself into trouble that she couldn't get herself out of, but her boundless enthusiasm could occasionally get a little wearing and at the moment he needed time- to think.

He was sure now that the Channel 400 building was the key to that mysterious signal. The readings that he had taken from the harvester confirmed they were beaming a carrier wave to the moon. That was next on his list of places to visit.

For the moment though, he had to find himself and Ace somewhere inconspicuous to stay – after he'd made a quick recce.

A hovercab loomed out of the rain and the Doctor waved frantically at it. It whirred to a halt, its antigrav fields hissing in the rain. He dodged through the traffic, hauled open the door and clambered into the back seat.

The robocabbie swivelled to look at him.

‘WHERE TO, SIR?’

‘The Channel 400 building please.’

The cab roared off into the air in a cloud of spray. Greg Ashby watched it vanish into the streams of airborne traffic.

‘Damn.’

He sprinted over to a shopfront and slumped against the glass. For a moment he considered hailing another hovercab and giving chase. He grinned. The idea of jumping into it and shouting ‘Follow that car!’ quite appealed.

He stuck his head out into the rain, letting the water splash on to his face, clearing his head. There was no way he was going to catch the Doctor now.

Suddenly his eyes snapped open.

The girl! The Doctor wouldn't abandon the girl. He was bound to be back for her, his biography confirmed that.

A huge grin spreading across his face, Greg began to saunter back towards the cafe.

## Chapter Three

Albee Greeth had lived on Blinni-Gaar all his life. Never even visited another planet until three moons ago. His father had been a farmer, as had his grandfather and his great-grandfather. If he had searched he was sure that his entire family would have been farmers, right back to the First Harvest, but Albee had always had talents in other areas.

From his earliest memory he had been interested in music, in sound, without the slightest interest in crops or cereal processing. His father and brothers had tried to pressure him into joining the family business, he remembered that, but his mother had always stood by him, encouraged him, sending him to boretha lessons when he was old enough, buying him Blinnati classical opera for his event-days.

Now he was an accomplished boretha soloist and owned a successful chain of music shops, not just here on Blinni-Gaar but throughout the system. Last month he had even begun preparations to start his own record label. Not bad for a farmer's son who no one thought had the business acumen to succeed.

His largest shop was here in Blinni Prime: the Albee Megastore. Here he had even negotiated a deal to sell vidcubes of Channel 400 programmes. He was due to have Roderik Saarl here-next month, gene-stamping copies of his latest release.

Albee puffed himself up, glowing with pride, then he glanced over at the doorway again.

The hooded figures had been lurking there for nearly an hour now. At first Albee had thought that they were just ducking out of the rain, but they seemed to have settled in more permanently than he would have liked.

He frowned. They were putting off customers. He peered around the shop. Usually a wet afternoon would have filled the premises to bursting point, but at the moment he had no more than a dozen people in the entire store.

He felt a sudden surge of panic. If any of these customers were Channel 400 people checking out his premises...

Albee was not a man prone to confrontation, but the next few days

were important to him and the thought of these delinquents coming back on the day that Saarl was due made him bold.

Straightening his tie, he locked the till with the biochip in his wrist, strode across the store and stepped out into the rain.

He cleared his throat. 'Excuse me.'

One of the hooded figures twitched its head in his direction, then turned back to the street. '.

Albee frowned. He didn't like being ignored. He another of the figures on the shoulder. 'I said, excuse me.'

The next few seconds were a blur. The breath was punched from his body and suddenly Albee found himself pinned against the wall of his shop. Sharp claws bit into his shoulder and a cowed face suddenly loomed close to his own.

Albee's breath caught in his throat as the light from the shop window illuminated the face under the cowl. Savage vulpine features leant in close. Gleaming eyes blazing with malice glared at him from under a pitted, sloping brow. The creature's mouth slowly opened revealing rows of viciously pointed teeth

Albee tried to make some sound but his throat was dry.

The creature peered at him, its eyes narrowing. Albee got the distinct impression it was trying to decide what he tasted like. A purple tongue slid over the curling lips and the thing leant forward.

'Barrock!'

The creature spun around, snarling in irritation. Albee could see another of the cowed figures towering over them, teeth bared.

'Barrock, he's moving.'

The claws released him and Albee collapsed on the floor, wincing at the pain from his shoulder. The cowed creatures were loping across the street, pedestrians hurrying to get out of their way. Albee hauled himself to his feet, shaking. Blood was beginning to seep through his shirt and people were staring at him.

Clutching his arm, he staggered back into his shop.

Concerned customers scurried over, anxious to help. Albee gently

ushered them out of the door. He was fine. Just ruffians.

Nothing to concern themselves over. He'd just shut up early and go home.

As the last customer hurried off into the darkening evening Albee locked up, pushed open the door of his office and slumped into the chair he had bought to help with his back.

Then he opened a bottle of Treeth and got very, very drunk.

The Doctor dodged out of the way as the cab took off in a cloud of spray. Shaking the water from his shoes, he huddled under a cluster of trees and stared up at the Channel 400

building.

The television studio clung to the mountain side like some enormous concrete fungus, offices and outbuildings sticking out from the rock at bizarre angles. The bottom half of the mountain had been quarried away, turned into a towering wall of granite, sheer and imposing, that stretched away into the distance. Balconies and terraces jutted from the smooth rock.

High overhead the transmitter mast pierced the clouds. The Doctor peered at the read-out on his pocket watch.

'Yes. Yes, this is definitely the place.'

A wide concrete path wound its way from the road towards the studios, the ground dropping away sharply on either side. It was like walking over a drawbridge to some huge granite castle. A huge neon sign advertising Channel 400

as the home of Roderik Saarl's *Late Night Breakfast Show* towered over the surrounding trees. Grimacing, the Doctor ducked under his umbrella, tucked himself into the shadow of the imposing wall, and headed for the main gate.

Commissionaire Reg Gurney smiled in satisfaction at his own face staring back at him from the gleaming black surface of his boot. Clean boots. The first sign of an efficient man. Thirty years in the space corps had taught him that. The rest of the security staff at Channel 400 thought that he was a relic of the war, a stickler for detail, but Reg knew he was right.

It didn't matter whether he was leading a crack troop of commandos in an all-out assault on a Dalek stronghold or instructing a team of commissionaires on how to keep teenage fans from invading a Channel 400 music programme, the rules were the same.

Efficiency. Smartness. Discipline.

Reg stood up, staring at his reflection. He pulled in his stomach and thrust his shoulders back. He was still in good condition, and his aim was still good. If the reserves were ever called into action he could still fight with the rest of them.

He fingered the stun gun in its holster. Not a proper gun, but it did the job. One of his first acts when he had taken charge of Channel 400 security had been to organise a rigorous weapons check every morning. Stun guns stripped to their basic components, polished until you could eat off them and reassembled. Oh, the others had complained at that, at least at first. It had taken strong decisive action to make them see the errors of their ways. He didn't like losing men, he had too few to start with, but Reg Gurney was in charge, and nothing and nobody challenged his authority.

A movement from the main entrance caught his attention.

A little man with a black umbrella was strolling towards the main gate. Reg's jaw dropped as the man muttered something to the guard on duty, gave a cheery wave, then ducked under the barrier and started trotting up the steps towards the main building.

Reg punched at the intercom to the security box.

'Briggs! Are you asleep man?'

There was a startled yelp from the communicator.

'What? Commander?'

'What the hell are you doing? You've let one in!'

Snatching his cap from his desk, Reg Gurney slammed open the door, unhooked his stun gun and began marching across the tarmac.

The Doctor was halfway to the main doors when he heard booted feet on the steps behind him.

'Stop where you are, you horrible little man!'

The Doctor sighed. He had thought that getting in had been too easy.

He spun around, a beaming smile on his face.

‘Good afternoon.’

Half a dozen men in dark red uniforms lurched up the steps towards him. Leading the pack was a large man in his fifties, his hair as red as his uniform, brandishing a large unfriendly-looking gun. He towered over the Doctor.

‘What in blue blazes do you think that you are doing?’

The Doctor tried his best to look innocent.

‘Ah, there you are. I thought I’d missed you.’

‘What?’

‘I’m here to look around your studios. I understand that you do guided tours. You are a tour guide, yes?’

Gurney’s face went a shade darker. ‘Tour guide!’

The Doctor’s face fell. ‘~. I’m obviously mistaken, Mr...?’

‘Gurney. Chief Commissionaire Gurney.’

‘I do apologise, Mr Gurney.’ He raised his hat. ‘I’m the Doctor.’

Gurney stepped closer, leaning down until his face was level with the Doctor’s.

‘You might think that you’re very clever, young fella-me-lad, and you might be able to pull the wool over the eyes of some of my more impressionable colleagues,’ He shot a filthy look at Commissionaire Briggs. ‘But I’ve dealt with your sort before and I’m not impressed.’

The Doctor stared into the bloodshot eyes. There was no way that he was going to be able to hypnotise this one. People like Gurney were always very set in their ways, and no amount of persuasion would ever get them to change. He smiled.

‘No, I can see that you’re a man of great efficiency, Mr Gurney. I must have made a mistake.’

Gurney straightened, a thin smile playing at the corners his mouth.



‘Yes, I rather think that you have.’

‘But now that I’m here, I would like to see the studio complex if at all possible. I have come rather a long way.’

Gurney smiled unpleasantly. ‘What a shame. Well, I’m afraid that isn’t possible. This is a very busy place, we haven’t got time for tours.’ He nodded at two of the guards shuffling uncomfortably in the rain.

‘Me Briggs, Me Rickett, will you escort our, *visitor*, back to the main gate please.’

The two guards shuffled forward. The Doctor stared up at them and sighed. ‘All right. I suppose I could phone and make an appointment to see the head of the studio?’

‘You could try, but I think it is unlikely. Mr Lukos is a very busy man.’

The Doctor raised his hat again.

‘Well, thank you for your help, Me Gurney. Good afternoon to you.’

The Doctor trotted back down the steps, dwarfed by the two security guards. Gurney watched him go, his lip curling into a snarl, then stamped back to his security booth and snapped on the communicator.

‘Mr Lukos’s office please.’

The boardroom of Channel 400 was a football-pitch sized expanse of polished wood and towering palms that looked out over the plains of Blinni-Gaar. There was a soft chime as the lift at the end of the room glided into position and the glass doors slid open.

Vogol Lukos stepped out on to the dais overlooking the room. He always liked to make an impressive entrance to board meetings, and this way he knew that all eyes were on him.

The huge conference table in the centre of the boardroom was already surrounded by the aged forms of the board of governors. Wheezing and twitching they turned one by one to look at him. Lukos sighed. A sea of grey-haired nobodies, only useful to him because of their money. He had had to get specialised life-support systems installed into the chairs of several of them. Still, once his legal terrorists had finished hacking into their wills an interesting spate of deaths could occur, and that would make fascinating viewing.

Lukos flicked his eyes across the table and scowled in irritation. Saarl's seat was empty. The man was becoming insufferable. Lukos crossed to the assembled governors, his shoes clicking on the hardwood floor.

'Good afternoon, gentlemen. I'm sorry to have brought you here at such short notice.'

'I hope you've got good reason, Lukos. This weather isn't good for me, you know.'

Lukos smiled. 'I'm certain that once you have heard what I have to say Me Treeb, the weather will be the last thing on your mind.'

Treeb snorted and creaked back into his chair. Lukos's eyes narrowed. At least now he knew which of his aged benefactors would be the first to die.

The double doors at the far end of the boardroom swung open and Saarl puffed his way across the polished floor. Lukos leant back in his seat.

'Ah, Roderik. So kind of you to join us.'

'I've got important things to do. Vogel, Shows to prepare.'

Saarl dropped into his seat. 'This had better not take long.'

'Yes, Lukos,' snarled Treeb. 'Get this over with. Why are we here?'

Lukos wiped his hand over a panel on the conference table and a huge screen flickered into life behind him, the lights in the room dimming automatically.

'For several months now I have been working with a new client on a unique new strand of programming. As you are all aware our profits for this financial period are good, but we would all like them to be better. Unfortunately we do spend rather a lot on programmes.'

Lukos touched a switch and images began to scroll across the screen.

'The last few years have seen us expand through several systems, and we now command almost 87 per cent of the total viewing public in this quadrant of the galaxy. Flagship shows like *Walking with Drashigs* and *Ogron Hospital* ensure that we keep ahead of our competitors, but these shows are expensive to make.'

‘I thought that is why we introduced those docu-soaps, Vogel, Cheap, popular television.’

‘Quite so, Governor Treeb. Giving gullible members of the populace a few fleeting moments of fame, and very little money, has indeed proved elegantly profitable, and the brain-dead masses watch in their millions. Sadly, because docusoaps are so cheap it has been easy for our competitors to follow our lead and we are beginning to lose ratings.’

A mutter of concern ran around the boardroom. Lukas smiled. That was precisely the effect he had wanted. Board meetings were always a performance for him, a chance to shine. He always had them taped, it was just a shame he could never get them broadcast.

He held up his hand. ‘Gentlemen, please. Believe me, no one is more concerned than I about recovering these viewing traitors. Indeed, our new partners have insisted that we increase our share of the viewing public. I guarantee that our new programme strand will have the eyes of the entire galaxy on the screens of Channel 400.’

His hand waved across the surface of the conference table again and the image of a little man leaning on a red-handled umbrella, his straw hat raised, filled the screen.

‘The star of our new strand.’

There was a snort of contempt from the darkness. ‘Him? A star? Your casting couch must be getting a little desperate, Vogel.’

Lukas’s mouth stretched into a humourless smile. ‘And have you any idea who that gentleman is, Roderik, my dear?’

Saarl shrugged. ‘Some cosmic hobo, a spacenik, that’s all.’

‘Really. Well, if you ever pulled your eyes away from the mirror and cast them over some of our current affairs programmes then you would realise just how important this

“hobo” is.’

Lukas leaned across the desk, his eyes blazing. ‘I assume you have all heard of the Doctor?’

A mutter ran around the table. Lukos smiled. ‘Yes, I thought you might have.’

‘We’ve heard of him, Lukos, but that’s not him.’

‘Wrong, Governor Treeb. It is him.’

Lukas keyed in controls and different faces began to scroll across the screen. A white-haired old man, a slight figure in an Edwardian coat, a tall Bohemian with a long scarf.

‘Each of these pictures is of the Doctor. He is a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey, and has the ability to change his physical form. He is a renegade to his own people and one of the most important figures in the history of this galaxy.’

The room was silent now, all eyes on Lukos. He strolled around the table, his carefully rehearsed speech now in full flow.

‘For century upon century the Doctor has been involved in some of the most important events of this galaxy. Since before the space era he has been cropping up in times of crisis and then vanishing again. He has been in combat with Daleks and Cybermen, has been responsible for some of the most astonishing rescues. Those of you who followed the Coralee disaster last year may not know that it was the Doctor who was responsible for its successful resolution. Those of you with an interest in history may find references to him stretching back years, on dozens of planets.’

Treeb grunted. ‘Preposterous.’

‘No, Governor, not preposterous. Magnificent. A time traveller, from a race about which we know practically nothing. A hero of mythical proportions.’

‘And you’re telling me that he’s agreed to star in one of our shows?’

Lukos pursed his lips. ‘Agreed may be a bit strong.’

‘What have you got in mind, Vogol?’

Saarl was looking at him through narrowed eyes. Lukos’s lips twitched into a smirk of satisfaction. Saarl was worried.

He could see the potential of this show. See himself dropping down the pecking order

Lukos returned to his seat.

‘Along with our new clients we have engineered a scenario which the

Doctor will find irresistible, an adventure of our own devising. We intend transmitting live every cunning plan, every failure, every twist and turn that we can put him through. Exclusive coverage of one of the most mysterious men ever to have lived, and only on Channel 400!’

Lukos sat back, watching the faces of the old men as they chattered amongst themselves. Mentally he was receiving his award. Best performance in a boardroom drama. He glanced across at Saarl. The presenter was chewing at his nails. Good.

It would be useful to have a hold over Saarl for once. His show might be popular, but the Doctor was going to show him just what popular meant.

The harsh ring of an intercom interrupted Lukos’s musing.

He snatched up the handset irritably. ‘Yes?’

His face cracked into a broad grin.

‘Gentlemen. If you care to look at the screen, you will get your first glimpse of our new star.’

All heads turned to look at the vast screen hovering behind Lukos. There was a brief shimmer of static and then they were looking out past the main gate of the Channel 400 building at a diminutive figure standing in the rain.

Lukos stabbed at a control and the viewfinder zoomed in until the Doctor filled the screen. He was huddled under his umbrella, peering at what looked like a pocket watch.

Abruptly he snapped it shut, brushed raindrops from the lapel of his jacket and began to trot away down the road.

Treeb stared at Lukos. ‘I hope you’re right about this, Lukos, he doesn’t look like much.’

‘Gentlemen, I am absolutely convinced that the adventures of the Doctor will prove to be one of the most memorable programmes that our viewers have ever seen. It has been titled to preserve the mystery and mystique of the Time Lords. Our new show is “Doctor When”!’

Chapter Four

A million miles away from the boardroom a single ship swam through the writhing colours of the Brago nebula, tendrils of flickering energy dancing over its hull.

Inside, two dark figures stared at the Doctor's receding form on it holosphere. The ship's control room was black and wet, ugly machine shapes coiling in the shadows. One of the figures leant over a console and stabbed at a control. At once the holoview changed to another view of the Doctor. The picture bobbed and weaved, the colours dancing wildly. The figure hissed into a communicator.

'Barrock! You must concentrate! Focus on the Doctor.'

The image sharpened.

'Will it work?' The other shape shuffled painfully forward, scrutinising the weaving image.

'It will work. The Time Lord is too inquisitive. He will not leave until he has found his answers and by then it will be too late.'

'And the Zzinbriizi?'

'They are difficult to control, but we can cause Barrock pain, and he will keep the others under control.'

The figure spoke into the communicator again.

'Barrock! Follow him. Report where he goes, report to me.

Do you understand?'

There was a guttural snarl from the speaker.

The figure hissed in irritation. 'We have given you speech.

Make use of it!'

'I will report to you.' The voice was gruff, and rasping.

'But my pack wants to kill. It is hard not to kill.'

'You will not kill!' A sense of near panic filled the dank control room. 'Give your men sport where you will, but the Doctor and his companion must not be harmed. There will be great pain if you fail us, Barrock!'

‘No!’ There was fear in the rasping voice now. ‘No pain. I will obey you. No pain.’

‘Then do as you have been instructed.’

The picture faded from the holosphere, and the two figures shambled into the dank shadows of their ship.

The Doctor walked away from the gates of the Channel 400

building with a frown playing across his forehead. He had been foolish. There was something going on inside, of that he was sure, and it might be wise to play things a little more carefully from now on. The readings that he was getting from his pocket watch were very disturbing.

A gust of wind swirled the rain around him. He pulled his jacket tight. He should have brought his duffel coat. It was getting dark, and cold, and Ace would be getting bored. Ahead of him the road was filling up with traffic. He would get a cab back to the City centre and sort out somewhere for them to stay. Ordinarily he would have moved the TARDIS a little closer but there was something nagging at the back of his mind, some feeling that the TARDIS would be better left concealed in the cornfields for the moment.

He leant back and stared up at the storm clouds. Through tiny breaks in the greyness the moon gleamed. Tomorrow he would return to the TARDIS and take a look at the moon.

A snap of branches made him start. The woods bordering the road were not large, but the darkening sky had turned them into a maze of shadows. The Doctor squinted into the darkness.

‘Hello?’

He stopped, listening. There was nothing. Shrugging, he turned back to the road. There was another noise, a rustling of leaves and a low throaty rumble.

The Doctor looked around, his brow furrowing. He scanned the trees again. For a moment he almost set off to investigate, then stopped.

‘Wandering through a dark woodland, with the light going and nothing but an umbrella for protection,’ he murmured.

‘What are you thinking of, Doctor?’

Turning his umbrella into the wind, he trotted back to the road and began waving frantically at the cabs that sped past.

In the depths of the forest Barrock had his claws at the throat of one of his pack. Six of the Zzinbriizi lurked in the dripping undergrowth, six pairs of eyes fixed firmly on the Doctor, six jackal-like noses sniffing at the air.

Barrock released his grip and the pack member struggled to his feet.

‘That was an easy kill, Barrock’

‘He is not to be touched, Kreeth, not until *they* say!’

‘Everything is when *they* say. You are meant to be leader.’

Barrock swiped out with his huge claws and the other Zzinbriizi crashed to the ground, blood dripping from cuts across his face.

‘Then do as *I* say!’ Barrock snarled.

He leant close. ‘When you disobey them, I suffer. I will not suffer without reason. Remember that Kreeth, or I will kill you.’

Kreeth rubbed the blood from his snout and hauled himself to his feet, fangs bared, then sloped off into the trees licking his wounds.

Barrock stared after the diminutive shape of the Doctor by the road. His pack was getting restless. They were Zzinbriizi.

They were used to the plains and deserts, to the hunt, not this lurking and watching. Not without the kill.

He rubbed at the camera implant in his temple. It hurt.

Everything hurt. Ever since *they* had changed them – given them bigger brains, given them guns.

Barrock hefted the weapon in his hands. At least the guns helped them kill... but they were no match for claw, or tooth.

The rest of the Zzinbriizi shuffled uneasily behind him.

His pack was finding their new intelligence even more of a burden than he was. He’d had to restrain them from killing ever since they landed on this planet. The local inhabitants were soft, easy prey. If he didn’t let his men kill something soon...



His attention snapped back to the Doctor. The little man was clambering into a hovercab. Barrock nodded at his pack.

‘We follow, Find where he goes. Then – we eat.’

The pack of Zzinbriizi began to lope through the woods, lithe shadows flitting through the trees. Barrock bared his teeth in satisfaction. Tonight he would let them kill. Kill like Zzinbriizi should. Throwing his head back, Barrock howled at the moon.

Ace glanced at her watch and then stared out at the rain-lashed streets. They were almost empty now, the crowds of commuters all safely back home, and probably in front of a television set. Flickering neon lights had turned the wet streets into a kaleidoscope of pink and blue and there was a constant babble from the hundreds of monitor screens that clustered at every street corner.

There was still no sign of the Doctor. He had been gone for hours.

Ace sighed. After he had vanished into the rain she had settled into a corner and watched people go past as she had eaten her sandwich. Blinni-Gaar was home to a bewildering array of life forms and Ace had stared in fascination at the multitude of different shapes that hurried past on feet or flippers or tentacles.

When the streets had begun to bore her she had turned her attention to one of the television monitors, trying to make sense of the local programming. Much of it revolved around the unpleasant red-faced man whose show she had seen in the TARDIS control room, but in amongst the adverts and game shows there was a smattering of news bulletins. Ace had noticed with interest that Coralee featured in several of the stories. That had made her smile. The last time that she had made the news had been back in Perivale, and it hadn’t been for saving everyone from voracious alien monsters.

The memory had started her down a long mournful chain of thought, remembering things about home, remembering similar wet afternoons where she and the gang would just hang out in a cafe or pub, trying to make their drinks last so that they wouldn’t be turfed out into the rain. Perivale had never been the most exciting place in the universe when it was wet...

She had been lost in the past when the man who had caught her eye earlier had come back in and sat across the table from her.

‘Are you sure that you’re not Monteean?’ he had said.

‘Because you’re giving Eeji Tek here a run for his money as the most miserable bastard on the planet.’

Greg and Eeji had continued to entertain Ace for the rest of the afternoon. Greg seemed to be fascinated by where she and the Doctor had been, where they were going. At first Ace had thought that he was just trying his best to chat her up, but there was more to it than that. The questions were a little too specific, a little too intense.

She had been suspicious at first, but Greg was very easy-going, and his constant ribbing of his Monteeekan companion had made her laugh out loud. He wasn’t her type, but it was better than spending an afternoon in an alien café on her own.

Greg was over at the counter at the moment, buying them another round of that disgusting coffee, whilst Eeji had nipped out to get some cigarettes before the shops shut. Ace could see his gangly form dodging through the traffic.

Greg slid back into his chair and pushed a steaming mug across the table. ‘I got him to stick some of the local rum in it this time. Should help disguise the taste a bit.’

‘Thanks.’

Ace took a sip and grimaced. ‘God, that’s meant to be an improvement?’

Greg shrugged. ‘Eeji seems to like it.’

Ace put down her coffee cup. ‘Have you ever got him to laugh?’

Greg shook his head. ‘Nah, physically impossible for them. The closest you ever get to Monteeekan laughter is the spines behind their ears quivering. You should see him when he gets scared though.’

Ace raised her eyebrows. ‘Really? What happens?’

‘He goes almost completely white. Only seen him do it once, lousy shuttle pilot nearly smashed up on landing.

Thought he’d never get his colour back.’

Ace sipped at her scalding coffee again, breathing in the heavy fumes of the rum. ‘How long have you two been together?’

Greg shrugged. ‘A few years. Met him at a gig on Brinhilla. Why?’

‘Just curious.’

Greg peered at her over the rim of his mug. ‘What about the Doctor, you been with him long?’

Ace nodded. ‘A few years.’

There was an awkward silence. They had already been through the usual ‘Is he your boyfriend/uncle/teacher?’

conversation, and Ace wasn’t going to hand out any more information on the Doctor than was absolutely necessary.

The cafe door swung open and Eeji Tek loped over to them, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

‘About time,’ said Greg. ‘Give me those.’ He snatched the sodden pack from the Monteean and fumbled with a book of matches.

Eeji nodded towards the street. ‘I think lift yours arrived has.’

Ace looked out through the rain spattered window. The Doctor was waving frantically at her from the back of a hovercab.

‘About time!’ Ace snatched up her jacket. ‘Thanks for the coffees, guys.’

Greg scrambled after her. ‘Hey, you can’t just go rushing off. How do I get in touch with you? Where are you staying?’

Ace shrugged. ‘Dunno.’

Greg rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a card. ‘Well, look, give me a call, my mobile’s on there. Perhaps get a drink one night?’

Ace took it, a smile flickering over her face. God, he was keen. ‘OK, I might take you up on that.’ She struggled into her jacket and pushed the card into a pocket.

‘I’ve got to go.’ She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and pulled open the door. ‘See you around, Eeji.’

The Monteean waved a gangly arm at her as she vanished into the downpour.

Greg slumped back into his seat and watched as Ace clambered into the hovercab and it roared off into the night.

Eeji Tek watched him with unblinking eyes.

‘Pleasure or profit you thinking, Ashby?’

‘I’m hoping for a little of both, Eeji, I’m hoping for a little of both.’

Ace shook her head, flicking raindrops over the inside of the speeding cab. The Doctor was staring at her, grey eyes twinkling in the dark.

‘Been making friends, Ace?’

Ace glared at him. ‘It’s not what you’re thinking, so don’t start,’ she said sternly. ‘Anyway, they found me, and I get the impression that they would have preferred to spend the afternoon with you.’

‘Really?’ The Doctor’s brow furrowed. ‘What makes you say that?’

‘Lots of questions about you. Greg seemed to know about you. Wanted to know where we had been, where we were going, stuff like that.’

The Doctor tapped his teeth. ‘I’m not sure I like being so fascinating.’

‘Oh come on, Professor. It’s hardly surprising. Coralee’s all over the news. Someone’s bound to recognise us, especially with all the telly sets everywhere.’

She saw that there was even a small television set nestling in the dashboard. Worryingly, the driver seemed to spend more time watching the screen than the road. Ace reached for her safety belt.

‘What’s the deal with televisions on this planet, anyway?’

Everyone seems a little obsessed.’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor thoughtfully. ‘Yes they do, don’t they?’ He leant forward and tapped on the window between them and the driver. It slid back with a soft hiss and the driver leant back.

‘What can I do for you, guv?’

The Doctor raised his hat. ‘I was wondering if you could tell us something about this planet. We understood that it was the foremost agricultural planet in the sector, but all we see in the fields are robots.’

‘Ah,’ The driver tapped his nose with a grizzled paw.

‘They got cable, didn’t they.’

‘I’m sorry?’ The Doctor looked at Ace, puzzled.

‘Cable television. Channel 400 moved in here about ten years ago, did a deal with the government, then the poor buggers here decided that sitting in front of the box all day was better than working, so they got the robots in. Didn’t half cause a ruckus.’

‘Are you telling me that the entire population stopped work because of television programmes?’

The driver nodded. ‘Every one of ‘em. Obsessed they are.

Do everything through the box, they do, shopping, work, everything. Some of them never leave the house.’

Ace shook her head. ‘But that’s stupid.’

‘Don’t I know it, love, but it left plenty of work for the rest of us. When the farmers stopped there was nearly a major disaster out on the rim. Not enough crops getting out. There’s been a provisional government running Blinni-Gaar for nearly five years now, they pay good credits for offworlders to keep the place going.’

‘And you’re not obsessed by the television programmes?’

The Doctor stared pointedly at the screen on the dashboard.

The driver laughed. ‘Nah, not really, but the footy’s good.’

On the screen Ace could see two enormous amoebas grappling with a glowing ball of light.

‘Go on son, get a pseudopod in.’ The driver grinned at them. ‘Good, innit?’

Ace glanced over at the Doctor. His face was hidden in the shadows but Ace could see that he was worried.

The cab pulled into a leafy suburban street, lit by soft yellow light and the ever-present monitor screens.

The Doctor and Ace bundled out of the back, huddling under the umbrella as the Doctor paid the fare. He thrust a squashy, rubbery note into the driver’s hand.

‘Keep the change.’

‘From a five Zaggan note? Thank you, guv!’

With a hiss of spray the hovercab powered off into the night.

Ace stared around her. The wide street was bordered with elegant tower blocks, sculpted trees stretching through winding gardens. The sound of the rain was almost drowned by the chatter of a thousand television sets from a thousand windows.

Ace shivered and hugged the Doctor’s arm.

‘What are we doing here, Professor? Why can’t we just get back to the TARDIS?’

The Doctor peered around at the identical buildings. ‘The TARDIS could attract undue attention, and we seem to have enough of that already. I’ve found a local family who do board and breakfast. They seemed quite keen to look after us for a couple of days.’

Ace nodded. ‘What magnificent cover story do we have this time? Doctor John Smith showing his ward the wonders of the universe again?’

The Doctor looked hurt. ‘Certainly not! I thought that given the preponderance of television we might have more glamorous alibis. I’ve told the landlady that I am about to start a new alternative comedy show at the studios.’

Ace stifled a laugh. ‘Alternative comedy. Right, Professor.’

‘You’re a presenter for a new line of children’s programmes.’ The Doctor waggled his hands at her. ‘You can impress them with your Blue Peter badges.’

He squinted through the rain at a street sign. ‘Aha, this is the one. Come along, Ace, it’s getting far too wet out here.’

They crossed the street and the Doctor rapped on a door with his umbrella handle. There was an excited babble of voices from inside and a tall Blinnati woman appeared in the doorway.

The Doctor raised his hat. ‘Good evening. Mrs Rooth, I presume? I believe you are expecting us.’

Barely able to contain her excitement, Mrs Rooth ushered them

inside.

Across the street, in the shadows of a garage block, Barrock watched as the door slid shut. He bared his teeth in satisfaction. Now he had somewhere to keep them under observation and could stop this endless skulking in doorways and alleyways.

He turned and loped back through the lamplit street to the edge of the woodland. The rest of his pack crouched in the undergrowth, their wet fur dripping.

They looked at him with eager, bright eyes.

‘We kill them, now, Barrock?’

Barrock snarled. ‘Not them. I told you, not until *they* say.’

He stared through the trees at the twinkling lights of the city.

‘But I here is other prey.’

His blunt snout broke into a wide jagged smile.

‘How hungry are we?’

## Chapter Five

Ace slumped on to the bunk bed and closed her eyes, trying to shut out the babble of voices from the dozens of television sets that were scattered through the house. She groaned as she realised that some of the noise emanated from a small set in the footboard of the bed. Was there nowhere on this planet that you could escape?

She and the Doctor had been treated like royalty from the moment they entered the house. Mrs Rooth, her husband and two of their three daughters had swarmed around them, chattering wildly, getting them drinks, drying their coats, making them as comfortable as possible. The eldest daughter, Gatti, had acknowledged them with the typical surliness of a teenager, and then vanished to her room.

What had been bizarre was that as soon as they were seated the family had turned back to their television screens and barely said another word. Ace had been expecting to have to keep up a long and complex ribbon of lies about what programmes she had worked on and the locations she had been to, but other than the occasional check that they were all right, the family’s eyes never strayed from the flickering

screens.

She had glanced across at the Doctor but he had merely smiled at her and began to browse through a telephone-directory sized programme guide, occasionally consulting his pocket watch.

Every time Ace tried to make conversation she had been waved into silence. Even when supper was served, the table was inset with screens and the children ate with their eyes never leaving the programmes.

Only Gatti seemed to be different. She barely brought her eyes up from her food and excused herself as soon as she had eaten. Ace had decided that she had the right idea and eventually made her own excuses.

The Doctor caught up with her in the hallway. 'Everything all right?' he whispered.

Ace nodded. 'It's just that zombie central here is going to drive me potty, Professor. How long are we going to have to put up with this?'

'Only a couple of nights. I promise. I want you to come with me to the Channel 400 building tomorrow, see if we can get past the commissionaires.'

Ace smiled. Good. He was involving her again.

'Right, Professor. Early start.'

Satisfied that she wasn't going to be abandoned again she had climbed up the stairs to her room. She was in a converted attic overlooking the city. Even late at night the distant towers were lit up bright as day, a gleaming line stretching into the night.

Now she just wanted a few hours peace and quiet.

Unpleasant synthesised music blared from the screen at the end of the bed. It was beginning to give Ace a headache.

She poked at some controls, but only succeeded in changing the channel. Roderik Saarl bounced into view, poking and jibing at some unfortunate member of the public.

The laughter of the studio audience was harsh and tinny.

There was a knock on the door. Ace crossed the room and opened it.



The door slid back. Gatti glowered at her from the corridor.

‘Mum wanted to know if you wanted anything.’

Ace nodded at the television. ‘Shutting that thing off would be a start.’

Gatti stared at her in disbelief. ‘You want it off?’

‘Yeah but I can’t find the off switch.’ She stared at Saarl’s grinning features. ‘It’s enough to give you nightmares, isn’t it?’

Living proof that you don’t have to be beautiful or talented to get your four minutes of fame.’

Gatti’s jaw dropped, then she gave a stifled giggle and stepped into the room. She punched a button and the door slid shut.

‘You should be careful what you say about Roderik Saarl.

If Mum heard you talking about him like that she’d have a fit!’

Ace snorted. ‘He’s only a television presenter, and not a very good one.’

Gatti gave her a sharp look. ‘I mean it: you say things like that in public and you’re liable to get lynched.’

Gatti reached under the bed and fumbled with a connection, ‘Saarl’s practically a saint on this planet, it’s worth remembering that.’

Ace perched on the edge of the bed, watching the Blinnati girl. She had been dismissing the Doctor’s concerns, thinking he was exaggerating things, but after tonight she could well believe that you could get lynched for speaking out about the wrong programme or star.

With a soft blip the screen went black. Gatti straightened.

‘There.’

Ace looked at her. like the rest of her race Gatti was tall and lithe, a delicate hint of green tinting her skin. The face was wide and smooth, almost reptilian but softer, with deep, intelligent eyes. Gatti was in good shape too – Ace could see powerful muscles in the girl’s arms. Gatti caught her looking.

‘What?’

‘You didn’t get into that condition by watching television all hours of the day. You’re not into it like all the others, are you?’

Gatti slumped on to the bed alongside Ace. ‘No,’ she said sadly. ‘No, I never have been. I’ve never been one to sit inside all day, not when there’s so much else to do.’ She smiled. ‘We were the best farmers in the quadrant once.’ Her face dropped.

‘It wasn’t always like this, you know.’

Ace nodded. ‘I know.’

There was a pause. A moment of silence; the endless chatter of programmes banished for a while.

‘What happened, Gatti? How did all this happen?’

The girl shrugged. ‘It wasn’t like it happened overnight.

When they started building the studios everyone thought they were mad, but then when they started transmission there were prizes, I mean big prizes. People became so wealthy and suddenly everyone started watching, desperate not to miss any opportunities.’

She shook her head. ‘Not that there are any opportunities.

To view you have to pay, to pay you have to have credits and these days the only way people are getting credits is by winning on Channel 400 game shows.’

She stared at Ace. ‘Dad used to be a farmer. Owned hundreds of acres of cornfields. Now it’s as much as we can do to get him to step outside the front door.’

Ace held her gaze. ‘They don’t approve of you, do they?’

Don’t approve of your lack of interest.’

Gatti shook her head. ‘Would you believe they even tried to get me to a doctor, to see if there was something wrong with me?’ She smiled sadly, ‘If it wasn’t so tragic it would be funny.’

Ace smiled at her.

‘So what does a girl do for fun on this planet if she doesn’t watch television?’

Gatti looked at her curiously. 'Do you like rock climbing?'

The vast boardroom was quiet now, the chairs empty. Vogol Lukos sat before the huge window, drink in hand, staring through the streaming glass at the rain-lashed cornfields.

He was suddenly aware of someone behind him. He turned. Roderik Saarl was standing in the gloom.

'Roderik, still up at such a late hour? Surely you need to be getting some rest before tomorrow's show.'

Saarl moved into the light. 'What are you up to, Lukos?'

Lukos swung his gaze back to the window.

'Up to, Roderik? Why, whatever do you...'

'Cut the crap, Lukos. What is the deal with this Doctor?'

You're not interested in making an award-winning documentary. The board might buy it, but I don't. There's something you're not telling me.'

Lukos sat back in his chair, regarding his star with cold eyes. 'You surprise me, Roderik. Showing some intelligence for once. Sit down.'

Saarl lowered himself into a chair, reaching for the bottle of Treeth. 'It's got something to do with these mysterious new clients, hasn't it?'

'You don't need to worry yourself about them, Roderik.

They are my problem and no concern of yours.' Lukos' tone was harsh. 'All you need to know is that ratings are their primary concern. Nothing else matters. Not quality, not standards, just eyes on screens. The Doctor will help us get those ratings. Unique, compelling programming. But he's not the prize.'

Lukos raised his glass and sipped at his drink.

'As far as those pathetic bone heaps on the board are concerned "Dr When" is our flagship show. Press coverage will be starting in the next few days, trailers on all the major screens. I've even got a planet out on the industrial rim starting to make action figures.'

Lukos turned back to the expanse of cornfields.

‘But somewhere out there is the Doctor’s ship, a Gallifreyan time machine, a TARDIS, and I want it.’

Saarl gave a snort of amusement. ‘Really.’

Lukos leant forward, grasping Saarl’s arm.

‘Think of it, Roderik. Think of what we could do with it.

Interviews with holostars who have been dead for years, *new appearances* by holostars who have been dead for years. With any event that happens we simply go back in time and get the camera crew ready to film as it occurs. We can have news teams at the Dalek invasion of Earth, the first Blinnati settlers, the birth of Christ, the big bang itself!’

The grip on Saarl’s arm was painful now. He shook himself free.

‘I had no idea you were so ambitious.’

Lukos sipped at his drink. ‘You should know by now not to underestimate me.’

Saarl’s eyes narrowed. ‘Where do I fit into all this? I am involved, aren’t I?’

‘Oh yes, my dear, you’re involved. But it’s early days. I’ve not yet finalised the programming, but when I do you’ll be the first to know.’

Saarl nodded and reached for the bottle again. Lukos stopped him.

‘I rather think that you’ve had enough, my dear. We want you looking your best for the cameras tomorrow, now don’t we?’

For a moment it looked as though Saarl was going to explode, then he nodded and hauled himself out of the chair.

‘All right, Lukos. I’ll see you in the morning.’

Lukos watched him cross the room to the lift. He liked keeping Saarl on his toes. Liked making him feel as though he had to stay on his guard. He would take great pleasure in handing him his notice when the time came.

As the lift door slid shut Lukos began to laugh.

The Bar Allegro nestled amongst the towering office blocks of the city

centre. During the day it was just another faceless grey building but at night, with the business quarter quiet and empty, it shone out like a beacon, its garish neon signs lighting up the street.

Unlike many of the bars on Blinni-Gaar the walls of the Bar Allegro weren't covered with monitors. It was a bar for the offworlders, and it was rare that any of the locals used it.

Not that it mattered. It was always full and tonight, with the wind blowing the rain horizontally across the street, it was packed.

Annie Halfrace had been running the bar for nearly twelve weeks now. The previous owner, a lumbering thug called Greebel, had finally got himself on the wrong side of the authorities and been shipped off to one of the penal compounds. Annie had been head waitress, but the certificate now hanging behind the bar gave her full ownership of one of the busiest drinking holes on the planet.

It hadn't been what she was after. She had just hoped to get a bit of work waitressing for a couple of years and then take one of the big cruise ships out to the rim, see a bit of the galaxy. Now she appeared to have a full-time career, but the money she was making made it very difficult to just give it all up.

At the far end of the room were the kitchens. She watched several of the staff vainly trying to push through the crowds, plates of steaming food held high over their heads, and shook her head. No, it had definitely been the right career move.

She stared around at the heaving bar. Dozens of different life forms jostled for space in the clouds of cigarette smoke, shouting and bellowing, the babble of conversation almost drowning out the background thump of music. Booths and alcoves, their occupants shrouded in shadow, stretched along one wall. Annie liked the booths. She was a romantic at heart and always liked to dream about what went on in the darkened recesses.

She let her eyes wander across the gloomy wall, then started. Two pinpricks of light gleamed from the shadows.

Like eyes. She strained to see and suddenly felt her spine tingle. It was as if there were dozens of eyes peering out from the shadows, watching her. Curious, she started to edge forward.

Shouting from the bar suddenly caught her attention. A small scruffy man was leaning over the counter, waving his arms at one of the bar

staff.

Annie groaned. Joonas Brett. Joonas was well known at the Allegro. Cheap-rate cargo pilot and professional drunk. He had been responsible for most of her unpleasant days when she was a waitress and it was looking as though he was going to continue that tradition now she was the manager.

Taking a deep breath she pushed her way through the crowds of drinkers and tapped Brett on the shoulder.

Joonas swung around, fists clenched, eyes straining to focus on her.

Then his face broke into a broad grin.

‘Well if it isn’t little, Annie! How ya doin’ Annie?’

He lunged forward trying to hug her. Annie sidestepped, and Brett staggered across the floor, barely able to stay upright. He tottered back towards her.

‘Jus’ tryin to be friendly!

‘What’s the problem, Joonas?’ Annie wasn’t in the mood.

The bar was busy and Brett nearly always caused trouble.

‘This bugger won’t serve me!’

Annie glanced at the lad behind the bar. ‘What’s he had?’

The lad nodded at a pile of Ogron Ale bottles. ‘That lot.

Now he’s after Draconian sake!

Annie nodded. ‘You’ve had enough, Joonas.

‘What?’ Brett tried to pull himself up straight. ‘Are you refusing to serve me?’

‘Damn right, now get your drunken arse out of my bar before I get them to throw you into the same cesspit that Greebel’s in.’

Brett reeled back as if struck. For a moment Annie thought that he was going to hit her, and braced herself to catch his arm. Then Brett pulled his jacket untidily around him, and peered around the crowded bar.

‘To hell with you! To hell with you all!’

With that he staggered out of the bar.

The young barman gave a sigh of relief.

‘Thanks Annie!’

‘You’ll get used to it, kiddo.’

Annie let her gaze wander back over to the alcove that had captured her attention. But the occupants, if they were ever there, had gone.

Brett wove his way across the street, pulling his coat around him in a vain effort to ward off the rain. His head throbbed and he could barely see a thing – shapes weaved in and out of focus. The cold sting of the rain was starting to sober him up.

He hiccupped.

‘Miserable bitch. How the hell could she throw me out on a night like this?’

He stooped and picked up a discarded beer can.

‘Bitch!’

He threw the can at the bar window. It clattered noisily off the glass and rolled into the gutter.

A gust of wind threw freezing rainwater into his face, and with a curse Brett lurched into a doorway. He was damned if he was going to go home before he had had another drink. He peered up the street, rubbing his eyes. There was a low rumble as a cargo thruster cleared the tops of the tower blocks and roared towards the distant stars. Brett watched it become a distant spot of light.

‘Cargo docks. Sid’s bar at the cargo docks.’ he muttered.

Staggering and slipping on the wet tarmac, Brett headed towards the distant glow of the cargo docks.

The business sector soon gave way to the edges of the industrial estate. Warehouses and cranes towered into the night sky and there was a constant blare of klaxons as shuttles launched from the cargo pads.

Brett blundered blindly on, head down, collar up, weaving down the centre of the wide road. A noise behind him made him stop. He peered into the gloom.

‘Who’s there?’

The wind blew papers in a tight spiral down the street.

Brett squinted through the rain. Nothing.

He snorted to himself in disgust, spat into the gutter and shuffled off again. At once there was another noise from behind him, the sound of something moving softly along the pavement.

Brett turned again. A shape flickered through the shadows cast by the street lamps. Then another.

‘There’s no point hiding. I can see you.’

He rubbed his eyes. He couldn’t make out how many there were in the dark. Kids probably. Locals finally bored with television.

‘Why don’t you just piss off home?’

He started walking again, faster now. There was rarely any trouble on Blinni-Gaar, let alone with the locals, but his head was still spinning and he was in no mood to start playing silly buggers.

The shadows kept pace with him, narrow shapes hovering on the edge of the lamplight. Brett felt his heart begin to pound. These weren’t local kids.

Suddenly aware that he might be in danger, he speeded up.

His blood chilled at the sound of something baying behind him, a low warbling howl, joined by another then another.

Suddenly more sober than he had ever been in his life, Brett ran. The warehouses hemmed him in on every side, the only signs of life came from the distant docks. Brett could see vehicles moving in the distance.

There was another howl from behind him, and a low throaty growl. Brett twisted his head to try and see, stumbled and fell. The breath was punched from him as he crashed into the tarmac.

The shapes were all around him now, a circle of shadows.



He could hear coarse, ragged breathing. He hauled himself to his feet, scrabbling desperately at the fence that bordered the docks.

‘Help! Help!’ The dockland lights were tantalisingly close.

If he could just climb the fence...

He flung himself at it, feet scrabbling for a foothold.

Suddenly there was a sharp pain in his back and he was hurled back to the ground. He rolled over, head pounding. He could feel something warm spreading over his back. The shadows were closing in now, eyes glowing in the dark. His breath caught in his throat as one of the things stepped into the light.

Matted fur clung to the narrow head. The pointed snout twitched and Brett could see row upon row of jagged teeth behind the curling lips. The eyes blazed, not with malice or with rage, but with hunger, pure animal hunger.

One by one the others stepped into the pool of light, each and every pair of eyes fixed on him. With sudden certainty Brett knew that his life was over.

The roar of a cargo ship drowned out his screams as the pack swept in.

## Chapter Six

The morning sun rose in a clear bright sky, making the pavements glisten with the night’s rainwater. Ace and the Doctor wandered through the streets of Blinni-Gaar, watching as the city came alive around them.

The Doctor had woken her early, while everyone else in the house was still asleep. That had been fine with Ace, she had no wish to go through another meal where no one would look at her. Even in the quiet of the morning she could hear the mutter of breakfast television. It was madness; the family couldn’t even be awake yet.

She had slipped a note under Gatti’s door telling her that she had to go over to the studios and joined the Doctor on the street. As always he looked fresh and relaxed. She had never seen him looking rough in the morning, but then again, she had never managed to get up before him.

The walk into the city centre had been quite pleasant; office blocks were opening up, commuters bustling through roads already clogged with traffic. It amazed Ace that everything could be so different and yet so familiar. Even when the commuter was a twelve-foot-high octopus there were the obvious trappings of the office worker – briefcase, mobile phone. She hadn't seen a bowler hat yet, but she was sure it was only a matter of time.

The local inhabitants were already beginning to congregate at monitors in cafes and squares. All of them had the same dead-eyed look. Ace remembered her grandmother telling her that if she watched too much television she would go goggle-eyed. Here on Blinni-Gaar it was almost literally true.

The two of them had returned to the cafe where they had been the night before and the Doctor had bought them coffee and croissants, then they had hopped on a bus and taken the long sweeping road to the base of the mountains, and the Channel 400 building.

The Doctor pointed at a block of buildings with the tip of his umbrella.

‘That’s the place I want to get to, the studio complex.’

Ace looked up at it through the Doctor’s opera glasses.

The massive concrete structure jutted out from the rock above the perimeter wall, huge signs marking Studio One, Studio Two and Studio Three.

‘That’s where the signal is coming from?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘No, but presumably that’s where they are recording what they are transmitting.’

Ace handed the glasses back to him.

‘So what’s the plan? Hypnotise the guard on the gate and sneak in for a look?’

The Doctor pursed his lips. ‘No. I tried that yesterday without much success.’

‘We could wait till it’s dark and climb the walls?’

The Doctor frowned at her. ‘No, no, no. I don’t think we need to be

quite so underhand. I thought we'd try a more direct approach.'

He pointed at an ever-growing queue of people at the gate.

'According to the programme guide, these people will be an audience for a popular music show. We'll simply mingle with them and then sneak away from the main group.'

Beaming at the simplicity of his plan the Doctor tucked his umbrella under his arm and set off at a trot. 'Come along, Ace!'

Shaking her head, Ace sprinted after him.

High above them, hunched over his desk, Vogol Lukos watched as the diminutive figure of the Doctor joined the ever-growing queue. Auntie's tracking software had alerted him as soon as the Doctor had got near the studios. Lukos was living in his office at the moment, not wanting to miss a moment of the drama as it unfolded.

'Oh, no, no, my dear Doctor. My viewers are hardly going to be excited if we just let you walk in, are they?'

He punched at a control stud. 'Security? We have unwelcome guests at the gate. Please remove them.'

Turning back to his screen, Lukos zoomed the camera in on Ace. A frown crossed his brow. He leant back in his seat, fingers steepled, staring at the face on the screen.

'Auntie?'

+ YES, MR LUKOS +

'Locate Rennie Trasker.'

+ MISS TRASKER IS IN THE NEWSROOM +

'Send her to me, as soon as she is free. I have a little job for her.'

The Doctor and Ace were just inside the main gate, heading up the steps towards the main studio block, when a huge gnarled hand clamped down on the Doctor's shoulder.

'Well well well. If it isn't my old friend who wanted a guided tour.'

Groaning, the Doctor turned.

‘Good morning, Commissionaire Gurney. How nice to see you again. This is my friend Ace. We were just going in to watch a show being recorded.’

‘Really, and just how did you manage to turn back time since yesterday?’

The Doctor frowned. ‘I’m sorry?’

Gurney smiled unpleasantly. ‘*Music Time* is a show for girls of fifteen and under. Now forgive me, but even if I was guessing your age wrong, I don’t think that you’re a girl.’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘I could be, one day.’

Ace stifled a giggle.

Gurney nodded at the other guards. ‘Throw them out.’

The guards began to bundle them towards the gate. Ace pushed one of them away. ‘Hey, keep your hands off, you ape!’

Gurney pulled the gun from his holster. ‘We can do this the hard way if you like.’

The Doctor waved his hands at the angry commissionaire.

‘I’m sure that there is no need for violence, Mr Gurney. Ace and I were just leaving.’

Steering a protesting Ace by the arm, the Doctor scurried out of the gate.

Back on the street Ace shook herself free. ‘We could have made a run for it, Professor. Got into the main building before they’d have stopped us.’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘No, Ace, I need time to look around properly.’

He turned and looked up at the perimeter wall, his lips pursed, then he crossed to the edge of the roadway and looked tentatively into the gorge below. It was steep. Impassable some would say – no doubt what the designers had wanted. He turned to Ace, his grey eyes twinkling in the morning light.

‘Did I hear you and young Gatti discussing rock climbing?’

Ace grinned.

The door of Lukos's office swung open with a soft hiss and a tall elegant figure entered the room. Lukos swung around to greet her.

'Ah, my dear Rennie. How lovely to see you.'

He hauled himself from his seat and reached for the woman, kissing her on both cheeks, letting his grip get just a little tighter and a little lower than was decent. Trasker pulled herself free.

'Nice to see you again too, Mr Lukos.'

Lukos could hear the distaste in her voice.

'I understand you have a job for me.'

Lukos settled back behind his desk, his eyes never straying from her.

'Yes, my dear. A little research assignment. Do have a seat.'

Trasker sat down opposite him. Lukos slid a data pad across the desk.

'Do you recognise the man?'

Trasker glanced at the picture on the pad and nodded. 'The Doctor. Causing quite a stir in the newsroom at the moment.'

'Well you're going to be seeing quite a bit more of him over the next few weeks. But I have a problem.'

Lukos lowered the lights in the room and activated his holoscreen. A picture of the Doctor filled the screen, a slight girl with a tangle of red hair alongside him.

'It would seem that the Doctor is a man of impeccable taste, and rarely travels anywhere without the company of an attractive young woman. According to all my research, this version of the Doctor should be accompanied by a redhead by the name of Melanie Bush.'

The picture changed to show the Doctor outside the Channel 400 gates.

'This was taken this morning.'

Trasker peered at the screen.

‘Different girl.’

‘Yes. Answers to the name of Ace, apparently.’

Lukos leant across the desk, his piggy eyes running over Trasker’s body. ‘I want you to find out everything that you can about this girl, Rennie. Where she comes from, how long she’s been with him, what planet her parents live on. Everything.’

Trasker nodded. ‘Deadline?’

‘As soon as possible. I’m expecting my first transmission very, very soon.’

Trasker stood, slipping the pad into her pocket.

‘I’d better get started then. I’m to report to you?’

‘Directly.’

Trasker crossed the office and opened the door. Lukos’s eyes never left her back.

‘Rennie?’

She turned at the threshold. ‘Yes, Mr Lukos?’

‘I don’t care how much it costs, or how far you have to go, just get me that information.’

Trasker nodded, and the door slid closed.

Ace looked up at the mountain looming above her, her eyes shining. Gatti was unpacking her rucksack.

‘How long since you’ve done any serious climbing?’

Ace shrugged. ‘Dunno. A few years.’

She thought back to the youth club that had introduced her to it. Not a proper rock face, one of those climbing walls. She had been hooked from day one. It was so simple. It was you against the rock face. If you climbed it, you won. There were no hidden tricks, no others trying to stop you, it was a straightforward test of skill and ability and Ace loved it.

She started rummaging through her own rucksack which the Doctor

had gone to fetch from the TARDIS for her. Some of the stuff hadn't been used since Yorkshire – the rock climbs on the beach with Jean and Phyllis. Before the Haemovores got them. Before they died.

She took a deep breath of clean mountain air. 'Clean out those bad memories, girl,' she murmured.

'Hmm?'

Gatti was looking at her.

Ace smiled. 'Nothing.'

Gatti handed her a harness. 'If you've not been climbing for a while then you are going to be seriously out of practice.'

'Hey!' Ace was indignant. 'I'm fit enough.'

'Yeah, in all the wrong places.' Gatti grinned at her.

'You're going to ache tomorrow.'

The Doctor pulled out his paisley handkerchief and mopped his forehead. The walks back and forth across the cornfields had taken him longer than expected. He had already been out here once, getting the bits and pieces Ace had wanted. Perhaps it had been a mistake to park the TARDIS so far out after all.

He could just see its lamp sticking out above the com ahead of him. Stuffing the handkerchief back into his pocket he pushed his way forward.

He unlocked the door of the TARDIS, stepped inside and hung his hat and umbrella on the hat stand. He crossed to the console and his hands danced over the hundreds of tiny controls. The background hum of the time machine changed in pitch and the grating roar of dematerialisation filled the control room.

Satisfied that the TARDIS was on course, the Doctor crossed to a tall elegant wardrobe that stood in one corner. It hadn't been there before. He smiled. The TARDIS always seemed to be able to second-guess him. The wooden door opened with a creak. Inside hung half a dozen elegantly simple spacesuits, their bubble-like helmets arranged neatly on a shelf.

The Doctor pulled one of them out. 'Now then, let's see if you've got

one in my size.'

Blinni-Gaar's only moon scorched under the blaze of the distant sun. The dusty grey surface rolled for miles, featureless and dead, the jet-black sky above threaded with colour from the distant nebulae. A single structure dominated the landscape: a slender tower, its arms dotted with hundreds of aerals and dishes, that rose higher than any structure on the planet below would be able to.

The dust at the base of the tower, unsullied by wind or rain, suddenly began to swirl, moving into huge sculpted clouds as, in uncanny silence, the police-box shape of the TARDIS faded into view.

Light suddenly streamed across the moon's surface as the door opened and the spacesuited figure of the Doctor stepped out on to the dust.

He jumped up and down once or twice, testing the gravity.

It had been a long time since he had resorted to wearing the TARDIS spacesuits.

Craning his neck back, the Doctor peered through the transparent bubble of his helmet at the transmitter tower stretching up into the heavens. Clumsy in the heavy gloves, he reached into a pouch and pulled out the incongruous shape of his pocket watch. He snapped it open and peered at the readings.

'Yes.'

He nodded. His predictions had been right. The transmitter was far more powerful than was needed for simple television transmissions. Pushing the watch back into its pouch, the Doctor began to bounce across the surface towards the base of the tower. A long-disused shuttle pad was almost obscured by the thick grey dust, and there were hundreds of footprints, evidence of the engineers who had erected the tower.

The Doctor reached for the narrow ladder that snaked up the transmitter's side and began to climb. The low gravity made it easy and before long he was perched on one of the outrigger arms, dismantling one of the transmitters arrays.

The lid of the control panel slid open and the Doctor peered into the tangle of components. Frowning, he reached in with a gauntleted hand, pushing wires aside.



Nestling amongst the familiar circuits was a gnarled alien device, strange symbols flickering across its slick surface. The Doctor frowned, straining inside the confines of his helmet as he tried to get a closer look. A force field shimmered around the device. Whoever had put it there didn't want it interfered with.

A sudden shiver went down his spine, a prickle at the back of his neck. He turned slowly, steel-grey eyes scouring the blackness of space. There. A single point of light amongst the billions of others, moving slowly across the tendrils of coloured gas trailing from the nebulae.

The Doctor watched as it suddenly shimmered and blurred across the sky. Something nagged at the back of his memory, something familiar about this area of space.

A sudden movement on the edge of his vision made him turn. A camera, perched on a strut of the transmitter. The Doctor smiled at the lens.

'Nice to know somebody's watching.' Suddenly aware of how isolated he was, he replaced the cover on the control panel. He had seen enough now to convince him that Channel 400 was more than just a television station, and that the aerials were more than just transmitters. It was time he got back to Blinni-Gaar. With one last look at the stars he began the long climb down to the TARDIS.

Watching from the oily shadows of their ship, the hooded figures hissed in satisfaction as they watched the Doctor scramble down the ladder.

'The Time Lord is even more suspicious now. He cannot wait to get into the studio complex and start his investigation.'

'It was dangerous to let him get so close to the transmitter device.'

'It was necessary. To stop him would have been dangerous. Besides, the force field is adequate protection. It would take time to disable it, and the Doctor is getting impatient. The discovery of our technology has just made him more determined.'

On the screen the tiny figure of the Doctor crossed to the TARDIS and stepped inside. Seconds later the police box faded into transparency and vanished.

The holosphere flickered and died.

‘The Doctor will not wait much longer. Tell Lukos to prepare his transmission.’

## Chapter Seven

Ace lay back in the hot soapy water of her first real bath in what seemed like years. Amazingly even the bathroom had a TV screen, set into the foot of the bath. It had already been switched off when Ace had got in. Gatti must have sorted that out for her. Every muscle in her body screamed, but she felt more vibrant than she had in a long time. The climbs Gatti had put her through over the last two days were good ones, and the Blinnati girl had been right – it had been a long time since Ace had done any serious rock climbing.

Her evenings had been good too. In the absence of the Doctor she had dug out Greg’s business card and given him a call. He and Eeji Tek had taken them out clubbing last night.

She slid down under the water, and closed her eyes. She was looking forward to having a go at that wall. The Doctor had turned up again at just the right moment – even if she still had no idea how he’d got a picnic table on to the mountain with no sign of the TARDIS. It still bothered her that she didn’t know the whole story, but at least she was an essential part of the Doctor’s plans.

There was a rap on the door.

‘Are you going to be in there all day?’

The Doctor.

Ace grinned. ‘Why? Is there some rush?’

‘Well, I thought we might get some dinner. We’ve got a busy night ahead of us.’

‘I’ll be right out.’

By the time Ace had dried herself and changed, the Doctor and Gatti were waiting for her in the front room.

‘Hiya, Professor. Had a good couple of days?’

‘So, so.’ The Doctor held out his hand. ‘Here, I brought you a present.’

He handed her a lump of grey stone.

‘A rock, great.’

‘*Moonrock*, Ace! He’s been to the moon!’ Gatti’s eyes were shining with excitement.

Ace gave the Doctor a quizzical look. She had expected that he’d been wandering on his own, she hadn’t expected him to be going quite so far afield.

‘What’s so special about the moon, then, Doctor?’

The Doctor tapped the side of his nose. ‘I’ll tell you over dinner.’

‘Right.’ Ace nodded, slipping the rock into the pocket of her jacket ‘Where are we eating?’

The Doctor looked expectantly at Gatti. ‘Any suggestions?’

Gatti pulled some menus from a notice board. ‘Well, there’s a Draconian takeaway on the corner, or we could try the new Argolin restaurant that’s opened.’

‘Argolin.’ Ace jumped in before the Doctor could open his mouth. Much as she liked takeaways, she wasn’t sure if she could stand another meal at the Rooth’s.

‘Right!’ The Doctor snatched up his hat and rolled it up his arm on to his head. ‘Shall we go? I’m buying!’

The Argolin restaurant was on the edge of Gatti’s estate, slightly outside the boundary of the city. It was bright and modern, set within an elegant meandering garden. Its clientele were mostly offworlders, and Ace was impressed by the number of expensive-looking flyers and antigrav cars scattered through the car park.

Inside the monitors and screens they’d seen in other bars were still present, but were far less obtrusive than elsewhere on the planet. The three of them were ushered to their table by a slim Argolin woman.

‘The Argolins are absolute masters of leisure and entertainment,’ explained the Doctor. ‘If *they* can’t get somewhere like this right then no one can.’

The Argolins glided around them, elegant in their peach robes, bringing drinks, serving food. The Doctor chatted endlessly to Gatti, asking her about the history of the planet, listening to stories about

the first settlers, the arrival of the television station. Ace started to get impatient. She wanted to know why the Doctor had been to the moon, and what he had found out.

Finally she managed to slide next to him while Gatti was inspecting the sweet trolley.

‘Professor, what did you find?’

‘Hmm?’ The Doctor was inspecting a curious lime-green dessert.

‘On the moon!’

‘Ah!’ The Doctor put down his spoon. ‘I’m not entirely sure, Ace. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking over the last day or so, but there’s something that I haven’t put my finger on yet.

Some piece of the puzzle that I’m still missing.’

He looked up, staring at the ceiling. Ace got the impression that he was looking *through* it.

‘There’s something familiar about this area of space.

Something about that nebula.’ He shook his head. ‘It’s just on the tip of my mind.’

There was a sudden commotion from the doorway. Gatti crossed back to the table and dropped into her seat. ‘Someone is trying to attract your attention, Ace.’

Ace looked up. Greg and Eeji Tek were in the doorway, arguing with the manager of the restaurant. Eeji was carrying a huge camera.

Ace shook her head. ‘What the hell are they doing here?’

The Doctor looked at her, his head cocked on one side.

‘Ace?’

‘I told you, Professor, they’re obsessed with you. What I didn’t know was that they were a camera crew!’

Having satisfied the manager, Greg crossed the restaurant.

Ace glowered at him. Greg held up his hands, trying to placate her.

‘Look, Ace, I’m sorry, OK, but this is going to bail me and Eeji out of a lot of trouble.’

‘Yeah, right. I should have known better, shouldn’t I?’

Greg looked hurt. There was an awkward silence. The Doctor suddenly coughed.

‘Aren’t you going to introduce us?’

Greg reached forward, and shook the Doctor’s hand. ‘I’m Greg Ashby. The miserable blue one is Eeji Tek. We’re part of a small independent unit providing programmes for a number of networks. We, ah... We were wondering if you would mind if we recorded a quick interview with you.’

The Doctor blinked. ‘With me?’

‘Yeah, we’ve got a transmission slot on a late-night chat show coming up in about...’ Greg looked at his watch, ‘twenty cycles. If you don’t have any objections...’

The Doctor beamed. ‘I’d be delighted.’

Ace’s jaw dropped in astonishment.

Greg adjusted a microphone on the Doctor’s lapel. ‘Right, Doc. We’ve got enough for the archive, now’s the fun bit.’

Suddenly the Monteekean held up a bony finger. ‘Ashby.

Ready for us, they are. Transmission in twelve.’

The Doctor brushed at his hair, peering worriedly at Ace.

‘How’s my hair?’

Ace suppressed a smirk. ‘You look fine, Professor.’

Greg settled into the chair opposite the Doctor. ‘Just relax.’

He peered over at Eeji Tek. The mournful alien gave him a nod. ‘Live in five, four, three, two...’

His hand swung down, and Greg launched into a well-rehearsed patter.

The next few minutes were some of the most embarrassing that Ace had ever endured. Far from being reticent about talking about his past, the Doctor seemed to revel in it.

He talked about Iceworld, Coralee, Daleks, time paradoxes, he juggled, he did magic tricks. The entire restaurant was completely captivated by the little Time Lord, Eeji Tek recording every move, every word.

The Doctor suddenly reached into his pocket. 'Of course it's not all just about saving the universe,' he said. 'I am quite musical.'

Ace buried her head in her hands.

'Oh, no.'

Vogol Lukos lay back in his chair, eyes closed, as the sounds of the Blinnati Opera wafted around him. He wasn't listening to the music, he was lost. Lost in dreams of different worlds and times, lost in dreams of every award that had ever been thought of lining the shelves in his office.

His fantasies were abruptly interrupted by the harsh shriek of his communicator.

'Yes?'

'Vogol, it's Roderik.'

'What is it, Saarl? Shouldn't you be in bed?'

The door hissed open. 'I think you should see this, Vogol.'

Saarl crossed to the desk and activated the holoscreen.

'This started about ten minutes ago.'

On the screen the diminutive figure of the Doctor was talking animatedly to an unseen interviewer and playing a clattering tune on a set of spoons. Lukos dragged himself from his chair, his eyes widening. His voice was barely more than a whisper.

'Who?'

'An independent crew, transmitting through the IntraVenus network.'

Lukos began to shake with rage. 'Auntie!'

+ YES MR LUKOS +

‘Trace transmission! Jam them! At once!’

+ YES MR LUKOS +

‘He’s not very good, is he? Lacks star quality.’ Saarl was peering at the screen. Lukos rounded on him, his eyes blazing.

‘Arrogant upstarts! How did this happen?’

Saarl shrugged. ‘Our transmission monitors picked it out. I happened to be in the newsroom, thought you would want to see.’

He scrutinised the screen again. ‘Are you really going to let him go on in that costume? I mean, a question-mark pullover...’

‘Saarl!’ Lukos’s fist was raised. Saarl scurried backwards, tripping over furniture. ‘Christ, Vogel...’

He stared at the quivering shape of his employer. Lukos was staring at the screen, his teeth grinding, breath hissing from his nose.

‘Auntie! Stop that transmission!’

The screen suddenly cut to static.

+ TRANSMISSION INTERRUPTED +

A moment later the IntraVenus logo flickered into life and a calm female voice filled the office.

‘We apologise for our loss of transmission, we are experiencing technical difficulties, but hope to resume—’

‘Shut that off!’

Saarl stabbed at a control and the office went quiet. ‘Do you want that crew dealt with?’ he asked.

Lukos slumped back into his chair, his voice barely more than a whisper. ‘No, Roderick, leave that to me.’

‘Damn!’

Greg punched at one of the tables. The Doctor looked at him, puzzled.

‘Is something wrong?’

‘Cut off. Those bastards at Channel 400 have cut us off.’

The Doctor’s face fell. ‘Oh, what a shame. I was just about to demonstrate my Alpha Centaurian juggling techniques, as well.’

Ace patted him on the shoulder.

‘Well, let’s be thankful for small mercies, eh, Professor?’

The Doctor glared at her. Ace crossed to Greg and Eeji.

‘You OK?’

Greg slumped at the table, his head in his hands. Eeji was arguing with someone down a communicator link.

‘Our fault not. Jamming there is.’ There was a loud angry babble from the communicator. Eeji winced.

Greg shook his head. ‘Bombed out again. Always happens. Just when I think things are going my way. Just when I’ve got a good feeling about something.’

‘Yeah, I know what you mean.’

Greg looked at her guiltily.

‘I guess I owe you an apology.’

Ace shrugged.

‘Ace, this was important to me, OK. I’m not going to pretend that I wasn’t a bastard to you. I’m not going to pretend that I didn’t use you to get to the Doctor. I had a story to follow, that’s my job.’

‘And to hell with anyone who gets hurt along the way, is that it?’

‘No, that’s not what I’m after.’ Greg could feel the situation running away from him.

‘But it’s what happens.’ Ace was looking at him angrily. He shook his head, unable to think of anything to say.

‘You’re not really cut out for this sort of thing, are you?’



Ace's expression had softened. 'Much as I hate to admit it, you're not enough of a bastard.'

Greg smiled at her. 'I'll take that as a compliment – I think.'

'What now?'

'Pack up here and get the hell off Blinni-Gaar. We won't get our fee for the live transmission, but we'll flog the tapes somewhere. Eeji's got a good business head. This trip won't be a total loss.'

Ace looked at him severely. 'I'm glad to hear it.'

Greg's heart sank again. 'No. That's not what I meant...'

Ace leant forward and gave him a peck on the cheek.

'Goodbye, Ashby. Get yourself another job, OK?' She stood up. 'See you, Eeji.'

Greg watched her saunter back over to the Doctor and her friend. Mentally he was kicking himself. Another disaster. He was aware of Eeji Tek's eyes on his back. He turned and glared at the MonteeKan.

'Don't start, right.'

Eeji Tek blinked mournfully. 'IntraVenus happy not.'

Dogbolter says...'

'I don't give a toss what Dogbolter says,' Greg snapped.

Eeji started packing the camera into its case.

'Off this planet get now, yes?'

Greg nodded. 'We'll head over to the shuttle port. See if we can get over to one of the inner planets. I know a couple of commissioning editors for some of the smaller networks. Let's see if we can get a deal with some of this footage.'

Eeji Tek nodded to where Ace and the others were sitting.

'She right, maybe, Ashby. Out of this business time to get.'

Greg nodded. 'I know, Eeji, I know. But what the hell else is there that we can do?'

He heaved a holdall on to his shoulder. 'Come on, if we're lucky we can get an overnight flight.'

'Lucky you call that?' The Monteekean picked up the camera bags and pushed open the restaurant door. Greg took one last look back to where Ace was sitting, but she was engrossed in some story of the Doctor's; he could hear her laughter echoing across the room.

Shifting the weight of his bag, Greg stepped out into the car park.

The evening was getting cold. There was no cloud cover and the moon was brilliant and silver. Eeji was already halfway across the car park, heading for their hired skimmer.

Greg groaned. Another expense they would have to cover.

Perhaps Eeji could try and do a deal with the hire firm. The Monteekean had vanished through the foliage on the far side of the car park. Why the hell had he parked so far away?

'Eeji! Hey, Eeji hold up.' Greg began to jog to catch him up. He pushed through the ornamental shrubs, cursing as his bulky bag caught on the branches. He stumbled out from the bushes, almost colliding with his partner.

'Eeji, what the hell are you doing?'

Eeji Tek was standing stock-still in the middle of the tarmac, his camera bags on the floor.

'Eeji?'

Greg caught his shoulder and spun him around. 'Eeji, what... ?'

The Monteekean was white, completely white. Greg suddenly went very cold. He felt his spine tingle. Eeji Tek was staring over his shoulder, Slowly Greg turned.

All around them, shadows were detaching themselves from amongst the parked spinners, closing in in a tight circle.

The moonlight glinted off eyes and teeth and claws. The creatures' breathing was fast and hoarse, vapour coiling around their black forms.

With frightening speed they surged forward.

Lukos sat back in satisfaction as the image on his monitor became a blur of fur and fang. The screams of the two men were drowned out by the snarling of the Zzinbriizi.

Alongside him Saarl watched in amusement. ‘Critics can be so harsh these days.’

## Chapter Eight

Someone tapped softly on Ace’s door. She scrambled from the bed. The Doctor stood on the landing.

‘All ready?’ he whispered.

Ace nodded and swung her rucksack on to her shoulder.

The two of them crept through the silent house to the street. A hovercab waited for them.

‘The local cab firm is going to miss you when we go, Professor’

The Doctor opened the door for her. ‘I’ve got to spend my money somehow.’

Ace grinned and clambered inside.

They sat in silence as the cab raced through the night, the driver’s eyes constantly flickering to the screen on his dashboard. The Doctor stared out of the window, hands clasped over the handle of his umbrella. Ace didn’t disturb him. There were questions that she needed answered, but the Doctor would tell her in his own time.

The cab turned up towards the main gate of the Channel 400 building. The mountain loomed over them.

The Doctor leant forward. ‘Just here, thank you.’

They clambered out on to the street and the cab sped off.

Ace stared up at the perimeter wall. It was less a wall, more an extension of the mountain, the rock machined to a glass finish.

She glanced at the Doctor’s diminutive figure. It was going to be a hell of a climb for him.

‘Are you sure you’re going to be OK with this, Professor

?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Let’s get on with it, shall we?’

Ace shrugged off her rucksack.

‘Gatti! Gatti, wake up!’

Gatti forced her eyes open to find her younger sister shaking her.

‘Freel? What in Harvest’s name do you want?’

‘Your friends. The Doctor and Ace, They’re on television, come and see.’

Gatti groaned. Ace had already explained that they had nothing to do with the television industry. She rolled over.

‘Go away, Freel, I’m trying to sleep.’

‘No, look!’

Freel snapped on the monitor screen on the foot of the bed.

Gatti suddenly heard the Doctor’s distinctive tones. She scrambled from under the covers.

The Doctor and Ace were clambering up the perimeter wall of the studio complex; a small ‘Channel 400 Live’ icon blinked in the corner of the screen. Abruptly the picture changed to the leering smile of Roderik Saarl.

*‘Will the Doctor and his companion discover what is in store for them? Find out after this short break.’*

The flicker of lightning-quick advertisements lit up the room. Gatti threw back the covers and dashed out into the hallway. The Doctor’s room was empty. So was Ace’s.

‘Freel, get my boots.’

‘But I want to watch—’

‘NOW, Freel!’

The little girl scurried off. Gatti began to haul on her clothes.

Ace struggled to the top of the climbing ladder. Biting wind twisted her and she looked down. The gorge had vanished into the blackness underneath her. Below her she could see the Doctor, clinging unsteadily to the ladder. She hauled herself on to the top of wall. Windows and gantries jutted out above her head. The next bit of the climb would be easy.

She reached down and grasped the Doctor's arm. He clambered up alongside her.

'Most exhilarating. We must do that more often.'

'Whatever you say, Professor. Where next?'

The Doctor shuffled along the top of the wall and peered in through a window.

'Time for *my* talent to shine, I think.' He tinkered with the catch on the frame, his hands a blur. There was soft click and the window slid up. The Doctor beamed. 'Ladies first,'

Ace slipped through the opening landed in a corridor, quiet and deserted. The Doctor dropped down alongside her.

'Odd.' He frowned.

'What?' Ace whispered.

'Too quiet.'

'Perhaps because it's three in the morning. Not everyone keeps the same hours as us, remember.

Nodding, the Doctor caught hold of her hand and the two of them crept forward.

Lukos sat in the darkened expanse of the studio gallery, his eyes fixed on the hundreds of screens. His heart was racing.

'Come on, my dears, come on. The stage is set, everything is prepared. Let the drama commence.'

The Doctor and Ace crept through the shadows of a deserted corridor. Ahead of them was an imposing doorway with a huge 1 painted in red.

'The main sound stage.' The Doctor pulled a stethoscope out of his

pocket and pressed it against the huge double doors.

He frowned.

‘Very odd.’

‘What now?’

‘Nothing. No sound at all. Rather strange for a busy studio complex, don’t you think?’

Ace was getting bored now. ‘Maybe it’s because they don’t like working late shifts. Come on Professor, you were wrong, that’s all. There’s nothing strange going on here. It’s just a studio, and not a very busy one either.’

The Doctor said nothing, merely reached out and pressed the door control.

With a deep, throaty rumble the huge doors slid open and he stepped inside.

Shaking her head, Ace followed him. The studio was dark and cavernous. She couldn’t see the Doctor anywhere.

‘Professor?’

Nothing. She peered into the gloom.

‘Doctor!’

With shocking suddenness the lights came on.

Despite herself, Ace was impressed. The studio was vast, the ceiling awash with thousands of lights. Camera and sound equipment littered the floor and an impressive jungle set stretched ahead of her.

The Doctor was peering into the foliage.

Ace crossed to his side.

‘All right, Professor. I’ll admit it’s a wicked studio, but what do we do now?’

The Doctor pointed into the jungle.

‘There’s something in there. I can feel it.’

‘But it’s a set.’ She pulled at one of the trees. ‘Plastic, fake.’

The Doctor tapped at his lips. ‘Nevertheless...’ Abruptly he set off. ‘Come along, Ace.’

Cursing under her breath she set off after him.

Gatti brought the spinner to a halt, the antigravity generators whining as they struggled to compensate for her clumsy driving. She wasn’t meant to be out in the spinner on her own

– she could barely drive it – but she knew that the Doctor and Ace were in danger, and her father’s spinner had been the fastest way of getting to them.

The screen on the dashboard had followed their progress into the studio and now as she watched it cut to another camera deep in the jungle. She peered out of the spinner window at the perimeter wall. Ace’s metal ladder glinted in the moonlight. Pitons and ropes stretched up the sheer wall.

Gatti shook her head.

‘Damn you, Ace, you should have told me.’

She shut off the engine and the spinner settled on to the tarmac. She was about to clamber out when a movement caught her eye. Several hunched shadows detached themselves from the forest and loped across the road. Gatti slid herself down in the seat as the creatures glanced over at her.

Then, with terrifying swiftness they swarmed up the ladder to the top of the wall and vanished from view.

Saarl appeared on the monitor screen again, along with a picture of one of the creatures.

*‘Zzinbriizi jackals. Ferocious carnivores from the Ektron system. A fitting adversary for our champion of time and space...’*

Gatti shut the screen off, her heart racing

‘I hope you know what you’re doing, I really do.’

Gatti slid out of the spinner, crossed to the ladder and started the dizzying climb.

Inside the studio Ace and the Doctor continued to walk, the jungle set getting denser and denser around them. Even though she knew it was only scenery, Ace was beginning to be taken in by her surroundings. Things seemed to flit through the tree tops and the canopy of leaves had closed over them; she couldn't see the ceiling any more. It was getting hot, too. She began to struggle out of her jacket.

'Hey, hang on a minute, Professor.'

The Doctor turned. 'Yes, it is getting a bit oppressive isn't it?' He mopped his face with his handkerchief.

Ace slumped on to the ground. It was soft. Like earth. She started to scratch at it, trying to find the hard studio floor.

'There's something very strange about this, Professor.'

The Doctor fixed her with unblinking eyes. 'Yes?'

'All of this is a set, right? A studio.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Yes.'

'But it feels as though we're in a real jungle, they've even covered the floor with earth, a lot of earth.'

'Yes. And... ?'

Ace frowned. 'And? And what?'

The Doctor cocked his head on one side. 'How far do you think we've walked?'

Ace shrugged. 'Dunno, difficult to tell in this jungle.'

Quarter of a mile maybe.'

She stopped, staring at him. 'Professor, we should have reached a wall by now!'

'Yes, we should have, shouldn't we?' The Doctor smiled grimly, 'But that means that this studio...'

'...is bigger on the inside.' The Doctor sank on to the ground beside her. 'The reason that I left the TARDIS a long way from here is that I think we were expected. I had a suspicion the signal in the vortex was designed to lure us here, and now I'm sure. I think that someone or



something is waiting for us. It's a trap, Ace, and I've led us right into it.'

'I couldn't have scripted it better myself!'

Lukos threw back his head and bellowed with laughter.

'He's an absolute star, Roderik, you see? Drama, pathos, mystery, and all I had to do was pique his curiosity.'

Saarl scowled. 'All right Lukos, but will the punters watch it?'

'Auntie!' Lukos shouted. 'Initial projections.'

+ LOCAL AUDIENCE FIGURES WELL INTO USUAL

PATTERNS. OUTER SYSTEM FIGURES BUILDING

STEADILY PREDICTIONS ARE OF TOP RATING SLOT

FOR THIS TIME PERIOD +

'Exactly as I thought!' Lukos punched Saarl's shoulder.

'They are not going to be able to resist him, Roderik! They are not going to be able to tear themselves away.'

Ace pushed aside a tangle of leaves. The path was getting harder and harder to follow. She was about to complain to the Doctor when a long mournful howl echoed through the trees.

The hairs on her neck stood up.

'What was *that*, Professor?

The Doctor had stopped, head cocked on one side. 'I'm not sure.'

The howl came again, closer now. The Doctor went pale.

'Oh, no.'

'What is it, Doctor? What's wrong?'

The Doctor suddenly pulled Ace to one side, ducking into a tangle of undergrowth.

'Quiet, Ace!' he hissed.

The howls began to build, a baying that echoed around them.

Suddenly it went quiet. The Doctor turned to Ace, his face grim.

‘Ace, we are in grave danger. If I’m right, then we are being stalked by a pack of Zzinbriizi jackals.’

Ace opened her mouth but the Doctor waved to her to be quiet.

‘There will be time for questions later, at the moment all you need to know is that they are cunning, vicious and will kill us without a second thought.’

There was a sudden crack as a twig broke close by.

‘Back!’ hissed the Doctor.

Ace could see a shape pushing through the undergrowth towards her. She reached into her rucksack for the piton gun, testing its weight in her hands. She could see the Doctor trying to wave her back again but she was damned if she was going to go down without a fight.

The figure was almost on them. ‘Ace? Doctor?’

‘Gatti!’ Ace caught her by the arm. ‘What the hell are you doing here?’

‘Thank God, I had to find you to tell you...’

‘Quiet both of you!’ The Doctor glared at them. ‘This is getting appallingly dangerous.’ The baying had started again, all around them. He pulled Ace to one side.

‘Ace, I want you to take Gatti and get out of here.’

‘Professor—’

‘NOW! I’ll try and draw the Zzinbriizi off.’

Ace was about to argue but the Doctor had that look in his eye, and she knew it only too well. She nodded. ‘All right, Professor. Whatever you say.’

The Doctor smiled and tapped her nose. ‘See you back at the TARDIS.’ He turned and vanished into the jungle.

‘No wait...’

Gatti started to scramble after him, but Ace caught her arm. ‘Are you mental? You heard what the professor said, he wants us to get out of here.’

‘But you don’t understand. He’s playing right into their hands!’

‘Who?’ Ace caught Gatti by the shoulders. ‘What the hell is going on, Gatti?’

The Doctor crouched in the shelter of a huge overhanging fern, scanning the path ahead of him. He had crashed through the jungle, making as much noise as possible, desperate to lead the Zzinbriizi away from Ace and Gatti, and now he was going to try and double back towards the doors.

He could hear or see nothing of the creatures stalking him.

The baying and howling had stopped – now there was silence.

He checked his watch. There had been nothing for several minutes. No sound at all. Cautiously he stepped out on to the path.

With a guttural snarl the jackal launched itself at him appearing as if from nowhere. The Doctor swung blindly with his umbrella, the creature bellowed in pain. Not daring to look back the Doctor began to run.

He knew it was futile, knew that he had no chance of outrunning the jackal, but at the moment he had no better plan.

Leaves whipped at his face, the ground was treacherously uneven. He stumbled and felt himself falling forward.

The ground vanished from beneath his feet and he began to tumble through the air. The slope was steep and slippery.

He rolled himself into a ball. Vegetation cracked and splintered. He hit ground again, began to roll and slide.

He hit the bottom of the slope hard, gasping with the pain, his eyes closed.

A low sinister chuckle floated around him.

‘My dear Doctor, you do tend to make the most dramatic of entrances. You really should conduct yourself with a little more dignity.’

The Doctor opened his eyes.

Lukos leant forward. 'Stand by with the theme music, get him in close-up. Cue Roderik.'

Saarl's deep tones boomed from a speaker.

*'Well, things are looking pretty bleak for the Doctor.'*

*Separated from his companions, stalked by Zzinbriizi jackals and now confronted by his oldest and deadliest enemy...'*

'Close-up,' hissed Lukos. 'Close-up now!'

A saturnine bearded face filled the screen.

*'... the Time Lord known as the Master!'*

The theme music crashed in and the screen faded to black.

Commercial Break

Would you like the chance to hunt with the greatest predators in the galaxy?

Would you like the opportunity to stand against savage untamed nature?

Have you got the adventurous spirit to come to Ottrase?

The planet Ottrase in the Ektron galaxy is a hot humid world, undeveloped, unspoiled. Herds of elegantly horned N'tumka cross the plains every year, migrating to cooler climes.

But death is a constant companion to these gentle beasts.

Zzinbriizi jackals, the most perfect killing machines ever created, lurk in the long grass.

Our seven-day offer takes you to Grenpall, one of the moons of Ottrase, where the Lukos Entertainment Group has created the Greatest Hotel in the Galaxy™. Here you can relax in luxury surroundings, content in the knowledge that your every need has already been taken care of.

Safari shuttles leave twice a day from our modern shuttle facility, to take you to where the action is.

High-powered phase-pulse rifles ensure that at no point are you in any danger, and our fully qualified roboguides will skilfully recover and mount your day's kills. (Lunch and ammunition all-inclusive.)

For those of you that just want a little more excitement, our Game Trail™ feature allows you the thrill of actually being out there with these magnificent creatures, secure in the knowledge that you are protected by a Lukos-System™ force screen.

And at the end of a long day's safari, we return you to your hotel to enjoy fine wines in our fully licensed bar, and fine food, served by our Androgum catering staff.

For the adventure of a lifetime, come to Ottrase.

We'll bring out the Jackal in you.

Part Two

Chapter Nine

My dear Doctor, let me help you up.'

The Master held out a black-gloved hand. The Doctor hesitated for a moment then took it. The Master hauled him to his feet and the Doctor began to brush the dust from his jacket.

He looked back up at the cliff face he had just fallen down.

The jungle loomed high overhead. If he'd had any doubts that he was in a TARDIS he was certain now that he was.

He bent down and picked up his umbrella.

'There was a pack of Zzinbriizi jackals right behind me, you know.'

The Master peered past him. 'Yes, I know. I wondered what had attracted their attention.'

'You mean you didn't know it was me?'

'Delightful as it is to see you, Doctor, I am not responsible for you being here. I rather think that we are both being played for fools.'

The Doctor frowned. Something was going on here that he didn't understand, and if the Master was involved...

There was a howl from the jungle. The Master sniffed at the air.

‘They are starting to mass. I think we should leave this place.’

The Doctor regarded him curiously, The Master was obviously still infected with the cheetah virus that had almost destroyed them both; there was something cat-like about his movements, and his teeth were still disturbingly pointed. The Doctor shivered as he realised that whichever way he turned he was faced with a dangerous predator.

The Master seemed to sense his dilemma. He turned to the Doctor with a mocking smile. ‘Unsure what to do, Doctor?’

Unsure whether to trust me?’ He gave a low chuckle. ‘Stay here if you wish, but you know as well as I what the Zzinbriizi are like. At least you know that I have a certain regard for you.

It would do me no good to kill you, not at the moment at any rate.’

‘That’s comforting.’ The howling began to build in the jungle.

‘Well,’ said the Doctor, ‘Better the devil you know.’

The two Time Lords set off into the jungle.

Lukos clapped his hands in glee.

‘Perfect, absolutely perfect! Auntie, latest audience figures!’

+ PRE-BREAK FIGURES HAD AUDIENCE AT

NINETEEN BILLION. POWER PEAKS INDICATE

VIEWERS STILL TUNING IN. SHARE VALUES

INCREASING. AUDIENCE SHARE NOW RUNNING AT

SEVENTY FIVE PER CENT. ADVERTISING SLOTS

SELLING AT PREMIUM RATE +

Lukos laughed out loud. ‘And we’ve barely even started.’

He spun to face the assembled governors. ‘You see gentlemen, a crowd puller, just as I promised.’

‘All right, Lukos, you’ve made your point. You were right.’

‘Thank you, Governor Treeb.’ Lukos sang inside. Treeb congratulating him. Unheard of.

‘How high does the mainframe expect our audience share to go?’

Lukos took a glass of champagne from the table. ‘At this rate we can expect to have the entire galaxy tuned in by the end of the day, either watching live or holorecording.’

‘And the advertising rate?’

‘We’re increasing it exponentially, linking it to the audience figures.’

The governors turned to each other and began muttering excitedly. Lukos smiled. If only they knew the whole truth.

A floor manager scurried over to him. ‘Sorry to disturb you Mr Lukos, but Miss Trasker wants to see you.’

Lukos looked up. Rennie Trasker was outside the glass door. He nodded. ‘Tell her I’ll be right out.’

Lukos turned to the board of governors. ‘Gentlemen, I must leave you for a moment. Please enjoy yourselves.’

He crossed the room and stepped out into the corridor.

‘Rennie, my dear, bearing good tidings I hope?’

Trasker handed him a data pad. ‘It took a little bit of time, and we had to go back a long way into the archives, but I’ve got you what you wanted on the Doctor’s girl.’

Lukos scanned the pad, his eyes shining. ‘This is excellent.

Excellent! Can we get a news team to these locations?’

‘All standing by. I can leave whenever you like.’

‘Leave? My dear girl, I’ve got much more important things for you to do. Send a team, delegate your responsibilities.’ He tapped the pad. ‘This is fascinating stuff, so fascinating in fact that I think we can afford to develop an entirely separate line of programming! Auntie!’

+ YES, MR LUKOS +

‘The Doctor’s companion, the girl Ace, where is she?’

+ OUTSIDE STUDIO ONE. THE BLINNATI FEMALE

IS WITH HER +

‘Excellent. Inform security. Get Commissionaire Gurney to drive her out of the building, but tell him that the two of them are not, repeat not, to be captured. I want that young lady to lead us back to the Doctor’s TARDIS.’

+ VERY GOOD, MR LUKOS +

Lukos caught Trasker by the arm. ‘I think we should pay Saarl a little visit in the studio, my dear. Prepare you for your supporting role.’

Ace stared back into the cavernous gloom of the studio. There was no sign of the Doctor. Every instinct screamed at her to go back in and help him, but now that Gatti had told her that everything was being televised she knew she had no chance of getting to the Doctor and warning him without being seen.

Gatti hovered in the corridor, frightened and impatient.

‘Come *on*, Ace! They’ve got to know we’re here!’

‘I can’t just leave him! I’ve got to know what’s going on.’

Gatti caught her arm. ‘Then let’s find a television! If they are broadcasting everything that he does then we can watch, find out where they’re leading him!’

The sound of booted feet made them start.

Commissionaires, guns poised, appeared at the far side of the corridor.

‘There they are!’

One of the guards raised a gun and a stream of thick red liquid sprayed towards them. Ace hurled Gatti to one side. The liquid splashed on to the wall alongside them, hardening into a sticky web-like mass. Gatti pulled at Ace, dragging her back on to her feet. ‘Come on! We’ve got to go! Now!’

The guards began to lumber down the corridor towards them.

Gatti started to run. Ace gave one last anguished look back into the studio, then sprinted after her.



The Doctor and the Master stood at the edge of the jungle looking out at a vast barren plain. Red sand swept away in a bizarre dunescape, dust devils swirling through the air. Ahead of them vast structures stretched upwards – strange, twisted, root like buildings, looking more grown than built. Branch-like corridors and gantries twined amongst them, reflected in the glistening copper-coloured surfaces. The distant horizon shimmered in a heat haze and the sky overhead gleamed like brushed steel. A low moaning wail sang out over the sand, a mournful wind.

The Doctor gave the Master a quizzical glance. ‘If this is your TARDIS then you’ve got some very strange ideas about interior design.’

The Master set off across the sand, heading for one of the distant structures. ‘My TARDIS is damaged, Doctor. The entire pedestrian infrastructure is in a state of flux. We need to access an auxiliary control node and try and re-establish some kind of order.’

The Master pulled a small device from his pocket, a jet-black sphere, its surface twinkling with hundreds of tiny lights. ‘There are several power readings from the structures in front of us. I was tracking them before your rather melodramatic appearance. With luck we can access a control room before the Zzinbriizi catch up with us.’

The Doctor trotted after him. ‘An excellent idea, but may I ask why you have a pack of hungry Zzinbriizi after you? The last time we met you were trying to cure yourself by draining proteins and enzymes from helpless pensioners’.

‘It is a battle for survival Doctor, one in which I have no time for your qualms about inferior species.’

‘Really.’ The Doctor’s voice hardened. ‘Survival at any cost, the entire universe merely lab animals for you to dispose of as you will.’

‘If need be.’

‘Will you never learn? Will life ever mean anything to you?’

The Master rounded on him. ‘It means everything to me! I am dying, Doctor! All my experimentation, all my schemes have been for nothing. This body is being ravaged by a disease from a dead world, and unless I can stop it I will be dead within the year!’

The Doctor stopped, speechless. The Master started back across the desert. ‘We shouldn’t talk out here. We’ll head for one of the

buildings, hide ourselves from the Zzinbriizi. I need your help, Doctor. If we work together then perhaps we can try and work on a way of accessing the auxiliary control room and re-establishing some control over my TARDIS.'

Ace and Gatti huddled under one of the huge stairways that climbed the cavernous interior of the Channel 400 building.

The commissionaires had pursued them into the maze of corridors, but the lumbering middle-aged men had been no match for two agile young women.

Ace peered out into the hallway. No one. Not that that meant anything of course. From what Gatti had said they had cameras everywhere, but Ace had figured that under the stairs had got to be safe. What sort of crazy company would have cameras under the stairs?

She ducked back under cover. Gatti was shivering. Ace shrugged out of her jacket and draped it over her companion's shoulders. The girl wasn't cold, she was frightened. Ace smiled at her.

'It's OK. The coast's clear.'

'But as soon as we get out of here we're going to be picked up on cameras again.'

Ace nodded. 'We can't go out the way we came in, they're bound to have that covered.'

'What are we going to do, Ace? We can't stay under here for ever, someone is bound to see us eventually.'

Ace peered back into the corridor. Still no sign of their pursuers. She tried to orientate herself, struggling to remember where the main entrance was.

A noise from above made her start. Giggling and screaming filled the air and the stairs started to vibrate as a crowd began to descend from the level above. Soon the hallway was full of hundreds of teenage Blinnati girls with irritated commissionaires trying to keep order.

Ace grinned at Gatti. 'I think somebody likes us.'

Gatti nodded. 'It must be one of the late-night music show audiences.'

They'll all be ushered back to the main gate. I came with my sister once – hated it.'

'Well, come on then!'

Ace snatched up her rucksack, grabbed Gatti by the hand and hauled her into the throng, pushing towards the centre of the crowd to get as far from the commissionaires as possible.

With gruff barking commands the chattering crowd was herded down the hallway heading for the main door.

Lukos flicked from the under-stair camera to one mounted in the hallway ceiling and watched as Ace and Gatti were swallowed up in the crowds, a smile flickering around his mouth.

'She seems very resourceful. I think she will be ideal.' He leered at Saarl, 'One for the dads, eh, Roderik?'

Saarl nodded. 'I do hope that you are going to let me interview her.'

Lukos gave a look of mock surprise. 'Why, my dear boy, who else could possibly handle such a difficult assignment?'

With any luck Trasker will find all sorts of juicy gossip. The graphic designers are getting quite giddy with the possibilities that she is suggesting.'

+ MRLUKOS +

'Yes, Auntie?'

+ YOUR SEARCH TEAMS REPORT THAT THEY

HAVE STILL NOT LOCATED THE TIME LORD'S

VEHICLE +

Lukos nodded. 'I'm rather hoping that they might be redundant very soon. Tell them to keep searching though, Auntie.'

+ VERY GOOD, MR LUKOS +

Lukos spun round and gripped Saarl by the cheeks. 'It's all playing out, Roderik, it's all playing right into my hands.'

Saarl shook himself free.

'I don't understand, Lukos. You say that you want the Doctor's TARDIS, but this Master that you are using, surely his ship is a TARDIS as well? What do you need two for?'

Lukos slumped back into a chair with a sigh.

'Oh, my boy, you are an excellent interviewer and presenter, and you are very decorative, but you really haven't been blessed with a proportionately high intelligence, have you?'

Saarl scowled at him, saying nothing.

Lukos swirled champagne around in his glass. 'The Doctor's TARDIS will be ideal, as I have already explained, for getting me exclusive programming from any point in time or space, but we can hardly just contact the local cable-service provider and get a link to the distant past, can we?'

He closed his eyes, dreaming of his future. 'We need a transmitter *and* a receiver, one time machine on location, the other here in the studio.' He smiled. 'You see, I really have thought of everything.'

Ace gripped Gatti's arm. She could feel the girl tensing, ready to run, but they weren't outside the gates yet. They were tantalisingly close, but running too early could ruin everything.

Ahead of them commissionaires were collecting visitors'

passes, letting the huge crowd of girls back out on to the street in a steady, orderly stream. Ace could see the commissionaire she and the Doctor had had their run in with sitting in his glass booth.

She pulled Gatti close. 'Keep your head down and watch me. When I nod, we leg it.'

Gatti nodded. 'I've got my dad's spinner parked by the perimeter wall.' She held the keys up.

Ace grinned. 'Right. Here we go.'

The line of girls moved ever closer to the gates.

Commissionaire Gurney suddenly looked up, straight into Ace's face.

There was a moment of stunned recognition. Then he started to haul himself from his seat. Ace swore under her breath.

‘Come on Gatti!’

The two girls exploded towards the gate, pushing at the crowd in front of them. There were screams of indignation.

Ace could see commissionaires reaching for her.

She ducked her head down and shouldered her way forward. One of the scarlet-uniformed guards gave a grunt of pain as she swung her rucksack into his stomach. The gates were starting to close.

With a final effort Ace hurled herself, through the narrowing gap. Gatti was right on her heels, her hair streaming out behind her. Ace could hear shouts from behind her, but the road was wide and clear and soon the two girls had left the Channel 400 building far behind them.

Lukos switched off the videophone in his desk and turned to Rennie Trasker.

‘Our young friends have made their dramatic escape from the studio. I believe that you’re on, my dear.’

## Chapter Ten

Greg Ashby groaned and tried to force his crusted eyes apart.

The light overhead was painfully bright. He screwed his eyes up again. His entire body ached, needles of pain stabbing at him.

Slowly he opened his eyes, squinting at the brightness.

Beyond the glare he could see nothing, just blackness.

He tried to move, but something was pinning him down.

He was on some sort of couch, strapped down. He tried to twist himself around but waves of pain and nausea flowed over him and he slumped back.

He licked at his cracked lips. He remembered the car park, remembered those... things swooping down on them and then... nothing.

There was a noise from the darkness, a shuffling.

‘Eeji Tek?’

He tried to twist himself around, straining at his bonds.

There was another bench alongside him and he could see a shadowed shape in the gloom.

‘Eeji Tek, is that you?’

He tried to twist his head further. The shape was definitely Eeji Tek. He could just make out the distinctive shape of the Monteekean’s skull.

‘Eeji!’

The chamber was suddenly flooded with light. Greg screamed. All that remained of the Monteekean was a head, the blue skin tom and bloodied, deep gouges in the skull. The entire disembodied head was clamped into a surgical brace with pulsing clear pipes winding from the severed neck.

There was a chuckle from behind him.

‘I’m afraid that our Zzinbriizi friends didn’t leave much.’

Greg struggled wildly against his restraints, trying to ignore the pain.

‘There really is no point. You are quite secure.’

Greg could feel his heart pounding, the room was starting to spin, the pain was overwhelming. He collapsed back on to the bench.

His unseen tormentor emerged into the pool of light. Greg recoiled in horror. The figure was swathed in dank heavy robes with arm-thick pipes trailing from beneath them and snaking off into the shadows. Its features were shadowed by a cowl, but Greg could see scarred weeping skin and a twisted quivering mouth. The nail-less hands clenched and unclenched as the creature shuffled towards him.

‘Who are you? What the \_\_\_\_\_ have you done to Eeji Tek?’

The creature chuckled horribly. ‘We did nothing, we would have preferred him intact, but the Zzinbriizi were hungry.’

Another figure shambled from the shadows, pushing a gleaming chrome trolley. ‘You were more fortunate, at least they left most of you.’

Greg felt his blood run cold. He stretched his neck, staring at the reflection in the polished metal. His legs...

He was violently sick.

The first cowed figure tutted. 'It is of no consequence.

You will be given far more efficient limbs.' The creature lifted a cloth from the steel trolley. Knife blades glinted under the lights.

'Who are you?' Greg's voice was little more than a hoarse whisper.

The creatures leant over him, and Greg struggled to get the scream out as the light shone on their ravaged faces.

'We are the Fleshsmiths, and we are going to make you more efficient.'

Greg continued to scream and scream as the knives descended.

'It's OK, I think we've lost them.' Ace skidded to a halt, panting, her breath forming clouds in the cold Blinnati night. Gatti stopped and jogged back up the hill towards her.

'Dad's spinner is just around the corner.'

'Yeah, well, I suspect that they know that as well.'

Gatti looked concerned. 'You think they're going to be waiting?'

Ace took another deep lungful of cold air and nodded.

'Could be. Let's just not go running straight into them, eh?'

The two girls started to edge towards the perimeter wall, Ace keeping them in the shadows as her eyes scanned the surrounding woodland for any sign of pursuit. She peered around the corner. The road was deserted, the sleek metal shape of the spinner glinting in the first glimmers of morning light.

'Is it there?' Gatti tried to peer around her. Ace pushed her back impatiently.

'Yes it's there.'

'Thank Harvest for that.'

Gatti made to move forward, but Ace grasped her arm.

'Hang on a minute.'

Gatti shook herself free. 'Come on, girl, they've missed it.

We can be out of here in seconds.'

She started to walk towards the spinner, rummaging in her pockets for the key. 'Dad would have killed me if anything had happened to it.'

Ace followed her cautiously. Gatti leant down to unlock the door. 'He's probably going to kill me anyway...'

'Gatti... !'

A commissioner stepped from the shadows of the wall.

Ace surged forward, skidding over the roof of the spinner, her booted feet slamming into the stomach of the guard and sending him sprawling into the undergrowth. There was the sharp report of a tape gun and a stream of sticky scarlet ribbons sprayed past Ace's head. She grasped Gatti by the sleeve and hauled her down the hill. The girl was almost hysterical. 'What are we going to do?'

'Head for the main road!'

Ace could feel her heart pounding. More and more red-uniformed figures were looming from the shadows. An ambush. Every move seemed to be anticipated. Ace felt a surge of panic. Every second that she spent out here was a second that she wasn't helping the Doctor. She had to find out what was going on.

Gatti stumbled, almost fell, and Ace dragged her back on to her feet. Another stream of red whistled past her.

'Come on, Gatti! We're almost there!'

Ahead of them Ace could hear the rush of traffic, see the glow of headlights lighting up the trees. With a final burst of energy she pushed Gatti forward through the undergrowth.

Traffic surged past them, a constant stream of lights and noise. Ace started waving her arms, screaming at the cars to stop. She could hear the guards crashing through the undergrowth behind them. Gatti looked at her in panic. 'No one's going to stop, Ace! No one's going to stop!'

Ace grabbed her hand and began to haul her along the hard shoulder of the road. A juggernaut thundered past drenching them both with



spray. Ace flicked the hair out of her eyes and began to wave her arms wildly. She was dangerously close to the speeding vehicles, the headlights were almost blinding her.

The pursuing commissionaires had pushed their way through the foliage and were starting along the hard shoulder after them. If they didn't get moving soon...

'Ace! Look out!'

Ace spun round in time to see a blur of metal race past her.

She threw herself to one side, rolling as the spinner screeched to a halt ahead of her. The door swung open. Ace could see someone beckoning them frantically.

'Come on!' Gatti was pulling her up. She could hear the commissionaires bellowing.

Ace scrambled to her feet and she and Gatti raced over to the stationary vehicle. They scrambled into the back and the spinner roared away. Ace peered through the rear window at the astonished faces of the guards and stuck two fingers up at them. 'Tossers!'

She slumped back into the seat, next to the exhausted Gatti.

'Well, now that I've saved your arses, perhaps you'd like to tell me exactly what I've saved them from.' The driver, an attractive dark-haired woman, was peering at them in the rear-view mirror.

Ace leant forward.

'That could be a long story, but if you can drop us at somewhere that's got a television I'll explain everything.'

The driver smiled. 'On this planet that shouldn't be too much of a problem.'

'Thanks.' Ace settled back into her seat, fumbling for the seat belt. 'The name's Ace, this is Gatti.'

The driver nodded. 'I'm Rennie. Rennie Trasker.'

The two Time Lords crept through the lengthening shadows between the towering buildings. The sun was low in the metal sky now, turning everything a deep orange. Even though the Doctor knew they were in a TARDIS-created environment, it was difficult to shake off the feeling

that they were outside.

Already he was feeling uneasy. Dusk was going to put them at a disadvantage. The Zzinbriizi were used to the twilight. In many ways the TARDIS interior was a perfect environment for them, the jungle and plain not dissimilar from the conditions on their home world.

The Doctor frowned. That was another mystery. Intelligent Zzinbriizi. As a species they were savage and animalistic, no technology to speak of, and certainly no space-travelling ability. Some races tended to use them as shock troops but these ones seemed to be acting on their own, which meant that someone had augmented them – and that was an appallingly dangerous thing to do.

He glanced over to where the Master was struggling with the door of one of the towering copper-hued buildings. They had been friends for so long, and enemies for even longer.

Usually he had some idea what his old adversary was up to, but this time there were too many parts to the puzzle.

The Doctor sighed. He was used to being the one making the complicated plans. It was an unusual feeling to be completely in the dark.

The Master glanced over at him.

‘Are you just going to stand there admiring the scenery, or are you going to help me?’

The Doctor smiled at him. ‘Didn’t want to get in your way.’ He crossed over to the Master’s side. The door was the same strange blend of material as the rest of the building, a peculiar copper colour. It had a large, old-fashioned lock set into it. The Doctor delved into his pocket, pulled out a paper clip and knelt down in front of the door.

The Master snorted in derision. ‘Always at the cutting edge of technology, Doctor.’

The Doctor didn’t look up. ‘Well, you know me, always a great one for good old-fashioned solutions.’

The copper door creaked open. The Doctor looked up and beamed. The Master glowered at him and pushed his way inside.

The inside of the building was a tangled mess of anachronistic

architecture. Curling pillars wound their way towards the ceiling, and chairs and tables lay scattered in piles.

Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust and cobwebs.

The Doctor ran his finger across a surface.

‘Someone has got a very theatrical taste in decoration.’

‘What are you babbling about now?’ The Master was studying his control device again.

The Doctor waved expansively. ‘All this. It doesn’t seem random, doesn’t seem like a malfunction in the infrastructure matrix at all. It’s more like...’

‘What?’ The Master was staring at him, his eyes blazing.

‘Like it’s been designed.’ The Doctor pulled one of the chairs into the centre of the room and sat in it. ‘I think it’s about time you let me know exactly what’s going on.’

‘In case you haven’t noticed Doctor, we are being hunted.

If we don’t manage to access this control node...’

‘The Zzinbriizi are likely to wait until dark before they attack. I think that we are in far more danger if you keep me ignorant.’

‘Doctor...’

‘Tell me!’

‘Flash break! Get us close-ups on all cameras in that room, stand by to go back on air as soon as they start talking!’

Lukos was hunched forward over the control desk, his eyes gleaming with excitement. His new stars were performing exactly as he had hoped.

Up on the moon, on the cold wastes of Blinni-Orkos, the transmitter tower began to throb with power. Ribbons of energy, flickering fingers of blue lightning, started to dance across the outstretched arms of the mast, sparking as they arced into the dust. The glistening organ-like clusters of technology tucked amongst the transmitters began to throb and writhe, lights starting to pulse under the skin, getting brighter and brighter.

‘I wish I understood it, Briggsy.’

Commissionaire Briggs looked at his partner. Rickett was not a happy man. Briggs shrugged and continued struggling with his steak. It was tough. Canteen steaks were always tough. All through the canteen there were commissionaires struggling with small leathery bits of meat. Briggs sighed. The most up-to-date television company in the universe and they couldn’t get a simple steak right.

‘I mean, think about it.’ Rickett pointed at the huge screen.

‘First we’re told not to let him in. Then we’re told let him break in and don’t stop him, then we’re told to chase the girl out, and now the bloke’s on television and Lukos is hailing him as a-star, Where’s the sense in that, eh?’

Briggs shrugged again, ‘Management. They know what they’re doing.’

‘Really?’ Rickett snorted. ‘Do you think so?’

‘Look.’ Briggs put down his knife. ‘We do what we’re told to do, OK. I don’t care about their little plans. I just want a steak that I don’t need a laser to cut.’

‘And look at this!’ Rickett rolled up one leg of his trousers. ‘Look at that bruise. That’s from that girl. Industrial accident that is. I should get compensation for that.’

‘I mean, it’s not as if the vegetables are any better. And they say the Blinnati used to be great farmers. I’ve seen better greens in my garden.’

‘I’m going to get on to the union, you know.’

Briggs looked up sharply. ‘Keep your bloody voice down.

You know what happens if any of Lukos’s people hear the

“U” word.’

‘All right, all right.’ Rickett slumped over the table. ‘But don’t think that these are the last bruises we’re going to get.

We haven’t seen the last of that girl, believe me.’

Trasker drove into the city centre. Even in the early hours of the morning there was a steady stream of traffic. Ace directed her to the

cafe she and the Doctor had gone to when they first arrived. Trasker turned her spinner off the main road, the engine winding down to a dull hum as she coasted into the cafe car park.

She shut the engine off and the doors slid open. Ace and Gatti clambered out of the back. Gatti was shaking her head.

‘I’m going to get murdered.’

Ace put a comforting arm around her shoulder. ‘You won’t be the first kid who’s got in trouble over her dad’s car.’

‘No, but I might be the first one on the planet who’s been stupid enough to go up against Channel 400.’

Trasker frowned. ‘You kids are involved with the TV station?’

Ace snorted. ‘Involved is a bit mild. Look, I’ll tell you all about it inside, OK?’

She pushed open the door, looking round hopefully for either Greg or Eeji Tek. Her face fell. The place was empty save for a couple of locals slumped over their drinks. The television above the bar was on – adverts at the moment, no sign of what the Doctor was up to. Happy that here at least she could see what transpired, Ace ordered three coffees and she, Gatti and Trasker slid into a table near the window.

‘I haven’t thanked you properly for saving our necks.’

Trasker sipped her coffee and grimaced. ‘I could hardly let those thugs catch up with you.’ She looked at the two girls expectantly. ‘But an explanation as to why they were after you might be nice.’

Ace and Gatti looked at each other. Ace took a deep breath.

The surgeon general of the Fleshsmiths stared out of the window of the ship at the planet below, the writhing tendrils of gas that formed the nebulae forming an ever-changing backdrop. Behind him the operating theatre was dark and quiet, the silence broken only by the breathing of the creature on the operating table. The creature that he had created.

A shadowy robed figure shuffled from the shadows.

‘Surgeon General.’

‘Speak.’

‘This man. This human that we have augmented. What is its function?’

The surgeon general said nothing for a moment, staring out at the muted colours in the blackness of space. Then he turned.

‘There are events occurring that I had not foreseen. Our allies at Channel 400 may not be as trustworthy as I had hoped, and our Zzinbriizi friends are duplicitous by nature.’

‘But they are under our control. The pain that we can give them...’

‘... makes them hate us as well as fear us.’ The surgeon general turned away from the window and crossed to the figure of Greg Ashby lying on the operating table. ‘I would rather have a tool whose loyalty is not in question.’

A scarred hand pulled back the sheet, scrutinising the creation underneath. Outside the operating theatre a television screen flickered with the endless programming from the planet below. The surgeon general turned to his waiting minion.

‘Take the ship to low orbit. We will release our new tool to be our eyes on Blinni-Gaar.’

‘And that’s about it.’

Ace sat back, watching Trasker’s face. The woman sipped at her coffee, the stub of a cigarette dangling from between her fingers.

‘You don’t believe in taking things easy, do you?’

Ace shrugged. ‘It’s a knack.’

‘Well, you two could be just what I’m looking for.’

Ace frowned. ‘How come?’

Trasker took a deep drag on her cigarette.

‘I used to work for Channel 400, wasn’t exactly keen on them as employers.’

Ace tensed, suddenly wary, ‘Doing what?’

‘Reporter, journalist.’

Ace shook her head. 'Seems there are a lot of you about.

Why did you leave?'

'Because they're corrupt, evil. They dumped me without a second thought as soon as they realised that I wasn't as easily bought as they were expecting.' Trasker gave a barking laugh.

'Not all journalists are ready to sell their souls to the devil.

I've been trying to get a lead on Lukos for over a year, without success. If I could get you two on camera...'

Ace suddenly exploded from her chair, pushing through tables, sending chairs flying in her haste to get to the screen above the bar.

'No!'

Gatti crossed to her side. 'What is it, Ace? What's wrong?'

Ace was grinding her fists on to the glass of the counter.

She couldn't take her eyes from the screen. Channel 400's coverage of the Doctor's exploits had resumed and there on the screen in front of her was the Doctor, sitting down with the man she had least expected to see.

'Who is that man? Ace, do you know him?'

Ace's voice was barely a whisper. 'Oh, yeah. I know him.'

## Chapter Eleven

The Master stood at the window, staring out over the shadowy plains of the TARDIS interior. The Doctor sat in the shadows, saying nothing, waiting for him to speak.

Finally the Master turned.

'Death is something that I have done my best to avoid, Doctor. I have clung to life, prolonged it by every means available to me. This body...' He held up a gloved hand, '...is not strong enough, and so I have endeavoured to gain a new one.'

The Doctor regarded him grimly. 'I believe mine was on your shopping list for a while.'

The Master gave a sly smile. 'And believe me, Doctor, I would gladly have taken it.' He inclined his head slightly.

'Though your present form is less than ideal for ruling a galaxy with.'

'Thank you.'

'I have run out of options though. The cheetah virus that plagues me has almost finished me. Oh I control it now, I have finally mastered the beast, but it is a strain, and I had so nearly rid myself of it.'

'How?' asked the Doctor. 'Where did you go?'

'I went to others for help.'

'Oh?' The Doctor raised an eyebrow.

'Have you heard of the Fleshsmiths, Doctor?'

The Doctor nodded. 'By reputation only. Not the best of reputations either.'

'They are an... ingenious race, Doctor. They have the ability to work flesh the way other species work with wood, they have pioneered surgical techniques and transplant technology to levels that are almost indescribable.'

'They also have a reputation as grave robbers and body snatchers, and are suspected of being responsible for the disappearance of thousands of spaceships each year.'

The Master shrugged. 'Your precious humans plunder their natural resources, Doctor. The Fleshsmiths are no different. Besides, I've never been too particular about the company I keep. You of all people should be aware of that.'

'What did they do for you?'

The Master lowered himself into a chair. 'They manufactured a new body for me.'

'A clone?'

'No, Doctor.' The Master shook his head. 'No a clone would have had all the faults and defects of this accursed Trakenite body.'

'That *stolen* Trakenite body,' the Doctor reminded him.



Anger flashed into the Master's eyes. 'Do you think I'm not aware of that every day of my life? Do you think I want to live like this?'

He leant forward in his chair. 'The Fleshsmiths made me a body Doctor, designed and made it to my specifications, A perfect, unblemished, empty vessel ready to house my consciousness, my essence. A chance to start again.'

He slumped back into his chair. 'So close.'

There was a pause, an awkward silence.

'What happened?' asked the Doctor.

'They tricked me.' The Master gave a curt laugh. 'Me, the Master. I walked into the trap like a blind fool. They had the body, Doctor, and that blinded me to the simplest of traps. If I ever get my hands on the scrawny neck of the surgeon general...'

'But all this, the deception with your TARDIS, for what purpose? To get at me?'

The Master looked at him levelly. 'I don't know, Doctor.

This is not a plan of my making. They forced me to pilot the TARDIS here, changed its internal configuration and then released the Zzinbriizi.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Yes, I knew that someone had to have tampered with the jackals' make-up. Not the most sensible of moves.'

'Oh, don't be too sure, Doctor. The pack leader of the Zzinbriizi is a creature called Barrock, and he has a guile and wit quite unlike the others. Intelligence has made him a most unpredictable enemy.' The Master bared his gleaming teeth.

'In different circumstances he would be the most entertaining of allies.'

The Doctor stood up and crossed to the window. 'Yes, well you never were very careful about choosing your friends, were you?'

'And yet you always seem to turn up.'

The Doctor turned, a silhouette against the light. 'A friend?'

'You cannot deny that our lives have been irrevocably linked, Doctor. That the path we both tread leads us inevitably in the same direction.'

'And yet we are always at each others throats. It's hardly the way most friends spend their time, waiting for the death blow.'

'But ironically that blow is poised above me, and without your help I am dead as surely as if you killed me yourself.'

The Master held out the control device. 'Help me locate the control node, Doctor. Help me regain control of my ship, and get back the body that I need to survive.'

The Doctor hesitated.

'Have we been enemies for so long that you've forgotten what we used to be like?'

'If our positions were reversed...'

'Ah...' the Master smiled. 'But they're not, and you're not like me, Doctor. You never were.'

Outside, from across the plains, came the long mournful howl of the Zzinbriizi jackals.

The Doctor took the control device from the Master's outstretched hand.

'I think we'd better get a move on, don't you?'

Saarl turned away from the screens in disgust. Lukos looked at him in dismay.

'Whatever is the matter, my dear? The emotion of it all getting too much for you?' He turned back to the screens. 'The drama, the pathos. Oh, I'm getting quite overcome by it all!'

'He's a ham, Lukos.' Saarl was getting bored. Lukos had promised him that he would be part of it all, a vital link in the day's proceedings, but so far all he had been was a glorified continuity announcer.

All around them in the studio gallery technicians scurried to and fro, checking that the signal from studio one was still strong, cutting back

and forth between the hundreds and hundreds of cameras that Lukos had installed in the Master's TARDIS.

Saarl's own team were hovering expectantly behind him.

Script doctors, make-up artists, personal trainers. Saarl cast a lecherous eye over one of the girls. He could think of better ways of spending the evening.

The board of governors seemed to find it entertaining.

They were all watching from the boardroom, but Saarl was beginning to feel very undervalued. He sneered at the image of the Doctor.

'He's not a leading man.'

Lukos's face hardened.

'What?'

'Well look at him. All that overblown emotion. It's a performance of the lowest possible quality. He gabbles his lines and his emphasis is in all the wrong places. No star quality.' Saarl shook his head. 'I'm really not taken, Lukos.'

'I'm not paying you to give critiques of my shows, Roderik,' snarled Lukos. 'Just to do your job.'

'How long is this going to go on for? How long are you going to play this out?'

'To the end, my dear. You will find that I'm very good at surprise endings.'

Ace watched as the figures of the Doctor and the Master vanished into the shadows of the ruined building.

'No, Doctor!' Ace was screaming at the screen. 'No!

Don't trust him! You can't trust him!'

She bolted for the cafe door. Trasker caught her by the arm. 'Now hold on a minute...'

Ace tried to shake herself free, her eyes blazing. 'Let go of me.'

'Just tell me what the hell is going on!'

‘I’ve got to save him!’

‘You’re not going to save anyone if you go rushing off in this state.’

Ace pulled herself free, glaring at Trasker.

‘Ace, what’s wrong?’ Gatti looked frightened.

Ace straightened one of the fallen chairs and slumped into it. ‘He’s called the Master. He’s another Time Lord and the bastard will do anything he can to kill the Doctor.’ She punched at the table. ‘What the *hell* does he think he’s doing trusting him like that!’

Gatti was scrutinising the screen. ‘It looks as though he’s lost those jackal things.’

Ace shook her head. ‘My guess is that they’re all part of the same plan, all part of the same sick plot by those bastards at Channel 400.’

‘So what do we do now?’ Gatti asked.

Ace stood up. ‘I go back. I get back inside and help get the Doctor out of there.’

Trasker snorted. ‘And just how do you intend to do that?’

From what I’ve heard you only just managed to get out of there in one piece.’

Ace turned on her angrily. ‘Look, I’m grateful that you got us away from those Channel 400 goons, and if you’ve got a problem with that company then that’s fine with me as well, but if you’re not going to help then just get out of my way!’

‘And just what the hell do you intend to do, Ace? Storm the gates?’

‘Not a bad idea. Either that or blow my way in.’ Ace shrugged on her jacket. She was fed up with being helpless.

She was going to get herself some insurance. She had always promised the Doctor that she would layoff with the nitro, stop using explosives as a solution to all problems, but there came a time when direct, loud and fiery arguments were all that there was left.

The TARDIS laboratory was well equipped, and there were chemicals that she had only dreamed about using. She had done enough experimentation to know that she could concoct some devastating

pyrotechnics. Channel 400 might just get her angry enough to use them. ‘Come on, Gatti. I want to head over to the TARDIS. I’ve got some stuff there that might be of use.’

The two girls pushed open the door and headed out on to the street.

‘Ace.’ Trasker pushed after them, following them into the street. ‘Look, I’m sorry. You’re right, we’ve got to help your friend. All I’m saying is that we should get a plan together before we go rushing off blindly, all right?’

Ace nodded reluctantly. ‘You got any better ideas for getting in?’

Trasker nodded. ‘We head over to this TARDIS of yours first, get your gear. As for getting inside the studios...’ She held up a small credit-card-like code key. ‘How about legal access to the newsroom?’

The Doctor peered at the read-out on the small control device.

The tiny lights were blinking steadily.

‘The control node should be in this Vicinity.’

‘Then you had better hurry up and access it, Doctor. We seem to be running out of time.’

The Master was peering out of one of the shattered windows. The Doctor followed his gaze.

Out on the plain below them the Zzinbriizi were beginning to gather. Long sloping shadows were breaking away from the darkness of the jungle and slipping though the cool twilight, the pack moving as one across the dunes, searching.

The Master looked grimly at the Doctor. ‘They are bound to have our scent. The barricades that we set up at the door aren’t going to keep them at bay for long.’

On cue there was a pounding from the rooms below followed by a long mournful howl. The Doctor felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. If the Zzinbriizi trapped them in here they didn’t stand a chance.

He rolled the sphere in his hands, tapping at the tiny control panels. ‘The readings are very erratic. There is a control node here, I’m certain of that, but it’s doubtful that we can access an auxiliary

control room.'

'Well it's better than nothing.'

The noises below them got louder. There was a splintering and a howl of triumph.

The Doctor's fingers started to dance over the control pad.

There was a low distant throb of power. At the end of the corridor the door suddenly shuddered under an enormous impact. The Master took a step back.

'Hurry, Doctor!'

'What do you think I'm doing?' The Doctor snapped.

The door vibrated again. Then there was a gruff, echoing growl.

'Doctor...'

The Doctor looked up in surprise.

'Doctor, we need to talk.'

The Doctor began to walk back down the corridor, shooting a wary glance at the Master. 'Really. I had no idea that Zzinbriizi were the chatty type. Barrock I assume?'

The jackal gave a throaty chuckle. 'No doubt your companion has mentioned me, though it's unlikely that he will have given me the best of character references.'

'Oh I don't know, cunning, ruthless, vicious... nothing that I didn't already know.'

'That is true of most of my race, Doctor, but I am no ordinary Zzinbriizi. I'm sure that there is no need for the crudity of this hunt. If we could just sit down and discuss things like civilised beings...'

'Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure.' The Doctor's hands continued to fly across the surface of the control sphere. The more time he could gain, the more chance he had of accessing the disabled TARDIS systems. 'I'm sure that in different circumstances we could while away the hours discussing the various ways of disembowelling a gazelle, or keeping claws clean.'

There was a snarl of anger from the other side of the door.

‘Take care Time Lord. You will find that I am not someone that you wish to cross.’

The Master started to haul a chunk of masonry in front of the door. There was a crack and a razor-clawed arm appeared, slashing at him.

‘Now, that’s not very nice, is it?’ called the Doctor. ‘I think that we’ll just stay on our side of the door if it’s all the same to you.’

‘Damn you, Time Lords!’ The Zzinbriizi’s voice was little more than a throaty roar. ‘There is no escape!’

The Master backed down the corridor, snarling. The cheetah in him was starting to emerge. The Doctor barely looked at him. Instead he took his eyes briefly away from the read-out on the control sphere. In front of him a section of wall was beginning to glow, a familiar pattern of roundels emerging beneath the stage-set trappings of the corridor.

He punched at the controls. ‘Come on, come on!’

Behind him he could hear the Zzinbriizi tearing the door apart. The section of roundels solidified in front of him. He tore one of them away revealing the circuitry underneath.

The howling of the Zzinbriizi was deafening. The Master’s snarling was almost as bad.

The Doctor hands flashed over the mass of TARDIS controls.

There was sudden and deafening silence.

The Master whirled, the animal fading from his face. The Doctor stood up, slipping the remote control sphere into his jacket pocket. The two of them were standing in a long corridor, bathed in a soft yellow glow. Roundels peppered the walls, stretching as far as the eye could see. The Master’s breathing slowed and he looked at the Doctor quizzically.

The Doctor beamed at him. ‘I’ve always felt far more at home in corridors.’

Chapter Twelve

The spinner swept across the cornfields, whipping stalks of corn back in the wind. Ace sat in the front seat, scanning the endless sea of waving crops that shone in the morning sun.

Trasker gave her a sideways glance.

‘Your friend didn’t exactly land in the most accessible of places.’

‘Yeah, well the professor was concerned about someone nicking the TARDIS so he parked it out of the way. Looks as though he probably did the right thing.’ She gave a grim smile.

‘Anyway, the walk probably did me loads of good.’

‘Are you sure that you can find it?’

‘I told you,’ said Ace impatiently. ‘Next to a huge copse of berry trees, about three miles outside the city.’

Trasker smiled. ‘That’s right, you did say. Just checking.’

She flicked her eyes on to the dashboard of the spinner, edging the speed back. Lukos’s men should have had plenty of time by now, but she wanted to make sure. She glanced over at Ace. The girl was worried about her friend and that would make her careless. The more she was off her guard, the more her world was taken from under her piece by piece, the easier this deception would be.

Trasker had done this hundreds of times. Find someone at their lowest ebb and slip under their defences, make them see you as nothing other than a solution to problems, an ally in adversity. Then came the skilled part of her job, then came the slow, gradual chipping away at those defences – from the inside. Asking, pushing, working on fears and anxieties, using the situation to get people to trust her and never ask why they were trusting.

It was an art, and one at which Rennie Trasker was a grand master. It had taken her from the newsrooms of the smallest companies and propelled her to the top of her profession. Oh, there were some who didn’t like her methods, there were companies that had thrown her out for unethical conduct, but they were all in the past. Vogol Lukos had snapped her up. He didn’t care how she got results, only that she got them. Trasker studied Ace’s face. If the girl only knew...

‘There!’ Gatti pointed excitedly from the back window.



Ace followed her gaze. The com circle, standing out like a sign post. 'That's it.'

The spinner swooped lower. Ace frowned. This was definitely the place, but the TARDIS ...

She hung her head in despair. 'It's gone.'

'What?' Gatti shook her shoulder. 'It can't have gone.'

Who knows it's here?'

'Look I don't know, all right!' snapped Ace. 'It was here, and now it's gone.'

Trasker brought the spinner to a halt in the centre of the circle of flattened com. Ace clambered out. There was a square indentation in the ground and the crops were trampled.

'Damn.'

Gatti squeezed her arm. 'What now?'

Ace looked at her mournfully. 'I don't know, Gatti. I just don't know.'

From the driver's seat of the spinner Trasker watched the two girls, a smile twitching at the corners of her mouth.

Another chink in Ace's armour. Another crack that she could use to get closer to the girl.

'Another one you owe me, Lukos,' she murmured.

Vogol Lukos clapped his hands in glee as the blue police-box shape of the TARDIS was lowered delicately on to the roof of the office complex. He was tucked in a doorway, wrapped in a voluminous coat, Saarl at his elbow.

The Channel 400 flyer hovered in front of them like some enormous garish insect, its engines kicking clouds of dust and grit from the roof of the studios.

With a snap the shackles holding the TARDIS were released and clattered on to the concrete. The flyer swooped away over the skyscrapers of Blinni-Gaar.

Lukos darted forward, the big coat flapping around him.

He ran his hands over the outside of the police box and turned, laughing to Saarl.

‘She’s a genius that girl, a genius. I really should use her far more often.’

He circled the TARDIS. ‘Two days those imbeciles of mine have been looking for this. Two days. Rennie Trasker gets the girl to tell her where the Doctor left it within minutes of meeting her.’ He started laughing again.

Saarl crossed the roof, squinting in the early morning light.

‘It doesn’t look like much, Lukos. Are you sure this is the right thing?’

Lukos gave a sigh of irritation. ‘You really are becoming a painful sceptic, Roderik, my dear. Of course I’m sure that this is the right thing.’ He stepped back, lips pursed, scrutinising the police box. ‘Of course, it’s not exactly looking at its best at the moment, but think of the adventures that it’s been through!’ He waved a hand dismissively. ‘I’ll get the scenic boys to give it a lick of paint before we take it into the studio.’

He waved at the men waiting behind him. ‘Take it away, carefully.’

He caught Saarl by the arm and steered him back into the studio complex.

‘I want you to present the tour of the machine, my dear.

You always have a way of making inanimate objects appear so alive.’

The surgeon general circled the holograph, watching as Lukos’s men dragged the TARDIS from the roof top. The picture flickered and swam. He hissed in irritation.

An aide struggled forward.

‘The neural pathways of the human are not fully healed.

To wipe the areas of the brain so selectively was not straightforward. Removal of personal feelings whilst retaining all useful information has not been tried this extensively.

There are still... difficulties. Strong emotions could cause interference.’

‘Your excuses are not welcome. Send our creature to search for the

Doctor's companion. Lukos has plans for her and I would like to know what those plans are.'

'At once, Surgeon General.'

The Fleshsmith turned to his crew. 'We can do no more here. Our devices on the moon are functioning perfectly. We will return to Scrantek and prepare.'

Out on the roadway below the roof tops of the Channel 400

building a single figure stood, its head tipped back, its body twitching. As if listening to a voice, it cocked its- head on one side, then shambled away into the shadows of the woodland.

Barrock snarled in anger. Around him the rest of his pack scampered uneasily in the long corridor.

'What has happened?' There was fear in Kreeth's eyes.

That made Barrock smile.

He peered around him. 'The Time Lords have gained some control over their machine. They have adapted the environment to one better suited to hiding than to hunting.'

He sniffed at the air. 'Their scent is distant and masked, but not impossible to follow.'

Kreeth snarled. 'We should have attacked sooner, Barrock, not given them time to do this. You gave them too much time to talk, to plan. These tunnels will slow us down.'

'Then we will change our hunting pattern.'

Barrock gestured to three of his pack. 'Circle ahead of the Time Lords, find a way to get in front of them. We will try and drive them towards you.'

The Zzinbriizi loped off, sniffing at the air.

'The Time Lords are on home ground now, Barrock,'

muttered Kreeth. 'It will be harder.'

'Then the victory will be all the greater.' Barrock started along the softly glowing corridor. 'The terrain is unimportant.'

As long as they run, they can still be hunted.'

The Master watched as the Doctor replaced the roundel cover on the control node.

'Pleasant as it is to have my ship looking familiar again, Doctor, I still don't see how it has helped. The Zzinbriizi are still in here with us.'

The Doctor stood up, wiping his hands on his jacket.

'I reset the pedestrian infrastructure with a two-degree offset.' He tapped at the wall. 'For all I know the Zzinbriizi are just on the other side of that wall, but it could take them several hours to reach us here.'

He beamed. 'You know how convoluted TARDIS corridors can be.'

The Master nodded slowly. A frown crossed his brow. The Doctor peered at him.

'Are you all right? You don't seem exactly overjoyed that I've just saved our lives.'

The Master pushed past him angrily. 'However much you have delayed our Zzinbriizi friends, we still have the same problem: locating a control room.'

The Doctor pulled an old-fashioned compass from his jacket pocket. 'Fortunately I have an infallible sense of direction!'

Ace stretched out on the sofa. Trasker had driven her and Gatti back to the Rooth's house. Ace couldn't think of anywhere else to go. The morning had slipped past quickly. She had insisted on making a search for the TARDIS but she knew it was futile. Eventually it had started to rain and Trasker and Gatti had finally persuaded her to give up. With nowhere better to stay, Trasker had booked into the Rooth's.

Ace was tired and desperate. Separated from the Doctor and now the TARDIS, she needed time to think, time to work out what the hell she was going to do.

Mrs Rooth bustled around them, making them drinks, checking that they were comfortable. All she could talk about was the fact that she had seen Ace and the Doctor on the television. She was seemingly

oblivious to the discomfort and danger they had been through. She didn't seem able to separate real life from fiction.

Ace shook her head. Talk about getting obsessed. Here she was trying to save the Doctor from his mortal enemy and everyone around her was just treating it like an episode of a soap opera.

On the screen she could still see the two Time Lords, the Doctor's diminutive figure trotting along the newly transformed TARDIS corridor, the Master striding ahead of him. The Roath kids were glued to the screen. It was infuriating. She could see everything that was going on, but there was no way of contacting the Doctor.

Mrs Roath bustled back over to her. 'It really is terribly exciting. Everyone is talking about it. The Doctor is so cute, and that Master, he really is quite a dashing figure, isn't he?'

Ace grimaced at her. 'Yeah, right.'

'Not that you aren't a star in your own right, Ace dear.

That climb over the wall was terribly good. Do you do all your own stunts? They seem terribly dangerous.'

Ace gave a humourless laugh. 'Sometimes they are, Mrs Rooth, sometimes they are.'

She sat upright. 'The climbing gear...'

She sprang from her chair and crossed to the kitchen, then knelt down and unzipped her rucksack. She pulled out the piton gun.

'I may not be able to get at my nitro, but this could be a wicked weapon in the right hands.'

'Your hands I assume.' Trasker was standing behind her.

'I'm not all that happy with lugging weapons of mass destruction around the Channel 400 building.'

Ace shrugged. 'It's not negotiable. Have you found a way of getting us in yet?'

Trasker placed a data pad on the kitchen table and sat down. 'Getting in isn't the problem. I'm fairly sure that my ID

card will get us past the gate, and there's enough room in the back of

my spinner to hide you two. The security guards are just old men playing at soldiers, they won't give us any trouble. Getting into the studio could be harder. Lukos isn't going to leave that wide open.'

'Lukos?' Ace sat down.

'Vogol Lukos, the director-general, he controls everything inside Channel 400. If your friend is in trouble then you can be sure that Lukos will have got him into it.'

Ace nodded. 'For the moment I'm just concerned with getting the Doctor out in one piece, I'm not after toppling any regimes. If you've got an issue with Lukos then that's your problem. Once the Doctor is safe I'm sure he will help.'

Trasker looked at her. 'You're concerned about him aren't you?'

Ace nodded. 'The Doctor can look after himself but I'm concerned about the Master. I wasn't expecting him. I don't think the Doctor was either.'

Ace snapped home the control panel on the piton gun.

'Right. This thing's set. I can't see any reason not to go for it, can you?'

Trasker shook her head. 'Ready when you are.'

In the street outside the Rooth's house the thing that had once been Greg Ashby stood in the rain, staring at the house. The camera embedded in his skull had transmitted images of Trasker and Ace back to the Fleshsmiths, complex audio equipment deciphering their speech, filtering out any extraneous noise.

Ashby stood motionless, a machine to be commanded by the Fleshsmiths, no will of his own. He turned his head, sweeping the camera that had become his eye over the figures inside the house.

His body suddenly twitched. He swung the camera back to the window, zooming in. A dark-haired woman filled his view.

Something flickered across Ashby's scarred face, something buried and suppressed by the Fleshsmiths struggled to the surface. Something familiar about the woman.

Pain suddenly seared through his skull, waves of pain, blinding him,

doubling him over. In his head he could hear the surgeon general giving instructions, driving his memories back.

Ashby clutched his head, and staggered into the cool sanctuary of the woods.

The surgeon general peered at the holographic image of Ace that hovered in the damp air, a hungry leer on his face. He stabbed at a control, freezing the image, and leant back. He turned to his waiting aides.

‘It is gratifying to see that there is such determination in these creatures, such strength. It is a shame that we cannot harvest that intellect and determination as easily as we can harvest the substance of their being.’

His deputy shambled forward. ‘Is the girl a threat to our plans, Surgeon General?’

The Fleshsmith shook his head.

‘Lukos has turned her into a toy, an amusement for his own insipid schemes. She is no danger to us and of no importance. It will keep Lukos distracted.’

Trasker’s spinner settled into the Channel 400 car park with a low hum.

‘OK. We’re in.’

Ace shrugged off the blanket that was covering her and clambered out, looking around her. The car park was full, staff going about their everyday business. No one paid her any attention. She helped Gatti out of the car.

‘We’ll stick to the outer corridors,’ said Trasker. ‘There’s no reason for Lukos to suspect that you’ve come back into the studio, but it would be stupid to get complacent.’ She crossed to a door and pressed her ID card into a lock. The door slid open. ‘We’ll head for the newsroom. If I can get up there then I can get you a freelancer’s card that will give you access to all the areas that you need.’

Ace nodded, hefting her rucksack on to her shoulders and followed Trasker into the building.

The Rooth family sat captivated by the flickering screens as Ace was

paraded in front of them. Mrs Rooth rocked backwards and forwards in her chair, bubbling with excitement.

‘To think, that girl in my house, and the Doctor. Ooh, it’s so exciting. We should be able to charge more for the rooms now that people know they stayed here, I’ve been telling everyone.’

Her husband shot her a look. ‘Shh!’

‘But, Maltin, they might have some influence. They might be able to get you on to the quiz shows, you’re terribly good, you’ always get the answers right. We’d have to come of course, to see you play...’

‘Will you be quiet, I’m trying to watch!’

Freel Rooth sighed. It was always the same argument between her parents, mum always goading dad to enter more and more competitions, always pushing for him to appear on the screens. Freel didn’t like the quiz shows. She liked the adventure shows, and the ones with monsters. She had been following with delight the battle of the Doctor against the Zzinbriizi.

She lay stretched out on the floor playing with her new toys. The shops had already started selling models of the Doctor and Ace, as well as the monsters that they had fought.

A dozen figures lay scattered across the carpet. Daleks, Cybermen, Krill... There was going to be a full range and Freel was determined to collect them all.

A splintering noise made her turn round. ‘What was that?’

Her father gave a sigh of irritation. ‘Is no one going to let me watch this programme in peace?’

‘But I heard something,’ Freel protested.

‘Then go and look!’

‘All right, all right.’ Freel clambered to her feet sulkily.

‘It’s a boring programme anyway.’

She pushed open the lounge door and stepped out into the cool of the hallway. There was definitely a noise. She could hear something rustling, shuffling. She looked back into the lounge. Her parents were leaning forward, captivated by something happening on the screen.



Freel knew that she would only get shouted at if she disturbed them again.

Sighing she edged forward. The hall was dark, with long shadows cast from outside. Freel didn't like the hallway. It was the one place in the house that monsters could lurk. Her parents kept telling her that she was stupid, that there were no monsters on Blinni-Gaar, but Freel knew better.

A gust of wind blew leaves against the front door, making her jump. She crept forward, listening. There. That noise again. A dragging, a shuffling. It was coming from upstairs, from one of the guest rooms.

'Gatti, is that you?'

She peered up the stairs, hoping her sister's face would peer down at her in irritation. No one appeared.

There was a bellow of laughter from the front room.

Something was keeping her father entertained. Freel started to edge her way upstairs. The noises were getting louder. She kept telling herself that it was just a window that had come loose, curtains flapping in the wind. There were no monsters.

'Not on Blinni-Gaar.'

She stepped on to the landing. The sounds were coming from the room of the new guest, Miss Trasker.

Freel reached out and opened the door.

And started to scream.

Maltin Rooth rolled his eyes in irritation as his daughter's scream echoed from upstairs.

'That dratted child again.'

Freel screamed again, louder now, pure fear in her voice.

His wife looked at him in alarm. 'Maltin?'

He scrambled from his chair, tumbling into the hall.

'Freel?'

His daughter appeared at the top of the stairs, her face a picture of abject terror. Maltin raced up the stairs and scooped her into his arms. 'What is it Freel, what's wrong?'

Freel raised a shaking arm, pointing into the guest room.

Maltin recoiled in horror. His wife started to scream.

The room was a mess, the window shattered, the furniture turned over. Amidst the chaos was a creature, its thick robes soaked with rainwater, its clawed hands raking through Rennie Trasker's possessions.

It turned its face towards them and Maltin Rooth saw his own terrified face reflected in the glittering camera lens that was the creature's right eye. The creature held out its twisted, broken hands. It held a press card with a photograph of Rennie Trasker.

With a sudden scream of rage and pain the creature surged forward. Maltin lashed out, bile rising in his throat as his hand connected with soft weeping flesh.

The creature tumbled down the stairs, gurgling horribly.

There was a shattering of glass as the front door was torn from its hinges, then silence save for the sobbing of Freel and the babble of the television in the front room.

## Chapter Thirteen

Ace and Gatti huddled behind the bulk of a huge boiler. Ahead of them Trasker crept through the shadows. As soon as they had got inside the building she had led them down a stairwell into the service levels. The basement was vast, a tangle of pipes and corridors stretching back into the mountainside.

The only people they had seen were cleaners and service robots. They had been given a few curious glances, but no one had stopped them.

Ace didn't like it. She felt trapped. The ceilings were low and if they were seen by the commissionaires escape was going to be difficult.

Trasker came back and pointed at a stairway ahead of them. 'The newsroom is just at the top of those stairs. I'm going to get up there, check things out. You two wait here.'

She hurried away, vanishing up the stairs. Gatti sank on to the floor.

‘What are you going to do when you get in there, Ace?’

Ace shrugged. ‘I’m not sure yet.’ She pulled the piton gun from her rucksack. ‘But this should help my case. I’m just after getting the Doctor out of there.’

‘And then?’ asked Gatti.

Ace slid on to the floor next to her. ‘That’s up to the Doctor. He’s been up to something, I’m not sure what, but he thought it was important. Important enough to get himself captured.’

‘Quite a collection of unanswered questions. You really are an inquisitive pair aren’t you?’

Ace spun, lashing out with her foot, and caught the figure that loomed over them behind the knees. There was a muffled thump as it crashed to the floor.

Ace was on it in a trice, fist poised. ‘What are you doing down here?’

An elderly Blinnati man squinted up at her through half-moon spectacles. ‘An interesting question with a long and interesting answer.’ He smiled at her. ‘Would you care to retire somewhere more comfortable whilst I explain?’

Ace and Gatti stepped through into a bizarre room.

Everywhere there were books, hundreds of thousands of them.

The walls were invisible under shelves stacked two deep, the floor was piled high with only a narrow path snaking from the doorway to the desk. The desk itself was barely visible. Books and magazines flowed over the sides. The far window was almost completely blocked, the only light coming from a battered angle-poise lamp perched precariously on a pile of magazines.

The man bustled through the chaos, trying to clear a space for them to sit.

‘When is a chair not a chair?’ He stopped, looking puzzled. ‘Must think of an answer to that one.’

Ace and Gatti looked at each other in puzzlement.

‘Who the hell are you?’ asked Ace.

‘Good question, good question. A starter for ten!’ The figure danced over to them. ‘Too easy though. Simple observation.’

Gatti picked up a nameplate from the desk. ‘Gartrold Breame. Quizmaster, perhaps?’

The figure pressed his nose and made a buzzing noise.

‘First blood to the home team!’ He shook Gatti’s hand Vigorously. ‘Delighted to meet you. Gartrold Breame at your service, questions devised, conundrums set, riddles...’ He paused, then smiled. ‘Riddled, I suppose.’ He perched on the edge of the groaning desk. ‘What brings you to my humble abode?’

Ace took a look out into the corridor and closed the door.

‘We’re looking for someone, a friend of mine.’

Breame clapped his hands. ‘A treasure hunt, fabulous.

Haven’t done one of those for, oooh, absolutely ages.’ He shook his head. ‘They weren’t very popular with the masses –

not enough to win from the comfort of your own home.’ He held up a garish trophy, ‘Very stylish, but not as popular as credits.’ His face fell. ‘I always preferred it when they won trophies.’

Gatti took the trophy from him. ‘So you devise the questions for the game shows?’

Breame wagged a finger at her. ‘I’m the one who asks the questions, remember.’

‘That was hardly a difficult one to guess,’ said Ace. She stared around at the books. ‘You must have devised a hell of a lot of questions.’

‘Twelve game shows a day, fourteen if you count the omnibus repeat editions, special bumper celebrity quizzes on all the Harvest Days, seasonal extras if budgets allow. I’ve been with the company for eight years. For a bonus point, how many questions do you think I’ve devised since I started?’

Ace shook her head. ‘I’m not even going to try. Why the hell are you stuck down here in the basement?’

‘Ah.’ Breame lowered himself into a chair. ‘Now that is a question with a very sad answer. I’m afraid that I don’t quite fit into Mr Lukos’s ideal of the perfect televisual host. I’m of use to him, make no mistake, but as for my appearance...’ He tugged at his threadbare cardigan. ‘No amount of costume and make-up skill is ever going to prepare me for a starring role.’

I’m an embarrassment, and one that he likes to keep well out of the way.’

The door swung open. Ace swung the piton gun around.

Trasker stared angrily at her. ‘What the hell do you think you’re doing? I thought I’d lost you.’

‘It seemed a safer bet than just hanging around in the basement,’ snapped Ace. ‘How are you doing with those passes?’

‘It’s done, now come on.’

The two girls crossed back through the piles of books.

Trasker caught Gatti’s arm. ‘I think you’d better stay here.’

‘You’re kidding me!’ Gatti flushed with anger. ‘If you think you are going to leave me out...’

‘I could only get two newsroom passes, me and Ace. If you’re caught in there without one then security will stop us and we’re finished. If you stay here you’re out of the way.’

Safe.’

Trasker shot a look at Breame. ‘Is he going to give us away?’

‘An interesting idea,’ burbled the Blinnati. ‘Give you away? For what? As a prize? I’ve never given away women as prizes before. That could be a fascinating new concept! I must write it down.’ He started to rummage through the piles of papers, muttering to himself.

‘He’ll be fine.’ Ace smiled sympathetically at Gatti. ‘It makes sense you staying here. You’ll be OK?’

Gatti nodded. ‘I suppose so.’

‘You’d better leave her with that.’ Trasker nodded at the piton gun. Ace opened her mouth to argue, but Trasker stopped her. ‘You can

hardly pose as part of the news team if you're hauling heavy artillery around. Leave it with Gatti. She can act as back-up.'

Trasker pulled a small elegant handgun from under her jacket. 'Besides, I've got this.'

Ace slid the piton gun from her shoulder and handed it to Gatti. 'Keep your eyes peeled for trouble.'

'How?'

Ace nodded at the monitor screen half buried in the corner.

'If you see me on the early evening news, come in blazing.'

'You got it, girl.'

Ace gave her a hug then stepped out into the corridor.

Gatti closed the door, slinging the gun over her shoulder.

Breame stared at her from over the piles of books. 'Three ordinary-looking girls, but one of them has a dangerous secret.

Can you guess what it is, boys and girls?'

Gatti stared at him. 'What do you mean? What secret?'

Breame tapped the side of his nose with a pen. 'It's time for twenty questions, and the clock is ticking.'

Ace tensed as she and Trasker stepped into the bustle of the Channel 400 newsroom. Talk about stepping into the lion's den. A few heads turned in her direction as the glass doors swung open, but on the whole everyone was too interested in their work.

The newsroom was a vast open-plan office. Computers and monitor screens hung in untidy tangles on the ceiling and there was a constant underlying air of barely concealed panic.

Ace dodged out of the way as a news crew barged past.

Overhead the main screen showed the unfolding saga of the Doctor, the Channel 400 live logo blinking in one corner.

Ace could feel herself getting angry. It was as if a small boy had taken red and black ants and stuck them in a box together to see which

would win.

The camera was holding a close-up of the Master, his cold eyes twinkling with amusement. The Doctor might still believe that there was some good in him but she didn't. All she could see was Karra, dying from the wound from the Master's knife. Dying In her arms.

She shook her head. She had to remain focused. She was letting her hatred for the Master get in the way of the job in hand. Trasker had settled herself down in front of a computer terminal. Ace crossed to her side.

'I thought we were going to get over to the studio,' she whispered.

Trasker nodded.

'Just getting some information. Every little helps.' She stood up. 'This way.'

She shouldered her way through the jostling journalists, and pushed open a door. With a last lingering look at the monitor screen, Ace followed.

'Look! I told you, I bloody told you!' Rickett nodded at the screen. 'Black and blue we're going to be by the end of this.'

Briggs sighed and started to unwrap his sandwich. 'You heard Gurney, we're to watch. That's all, watch. You're not going to get bruised shins by watching a monitor, are you?'

'There's eye strain. You can go blind stuck behind these things all day. No one ever worries about that, do they?'

grumbled Rickett.

Briggs took a bite of his sandwich and grimaced. 'Why is their bread always stale, hmm? It wouldn't take much to get fresh bread.'

'Can't understand why we let her out if he wanted her back inside all along. Could have saved myself some knocks...'

'It's entertainment,' said Briggs. 'The punters love it. The switchboard has been jammed all day. My sister's kids think that she's fab. Got the toys and everything.'

Rickett grunted. 'Toys or not, I think we're going to regret letting her back in, Briggsy.'

Lukos stood in the centre of the stage that had been erected in Studio Two. Ahead of him was tier upon tier of seats, stretching back into the darkness. All around technicians were busying themselves with cameras and microphones.

Antigravity lifters were positioning hover lights and there was a steady whirr of servos as scene-shifter robots scurried to and fro.

Lukes thrust his hands into the pockets of his jacket and gave a deep sigh of satisfaction. He loved the moments just prior to a live show. It was like waiting for a stage play, or a concert, but with the knowledge that billions of people would be tuning in.

He crossed the studio floor, pushing through the glittering curtains. In front of him was the Doctor's TARDIS, resplendent with its new coat of paint. Lukos ran his hands over its side. There was a slight vibration, a hum of power from deep inside. He smiled. The time machine would give him so much. Oh, there was the possibility of unique programming, that was true, but it offered him so much else.

He already had teams of financial advisers poised to let him know the best way the machine could be used to manipulate the stock markets. Not only was he going to be very famous, he was going to be very rich.

He felt a shiver of anticipation. Once again he was about to premier something unique, something that people would talk about for years to come. Vogol Lukos presents the secrets of the Time Lords. Vogol Lukos presents... He always loved that bit at the beginning of his programmes. If nothing else because it irritated Saarl.

He looked around in irritation. Saarl should be here, getting ready for the show. Lukos waved a runner over.

'Much as I am loath to interfere with the smooth running of the television machine, all this preparation is a mite redundant without our presenter. Where is he?'

'Mr Saarl was called to make-up about twenty minutes ago, Mr Lukos.'

Lukos nodded and crossed the studio to the make-up room.

Saarl was reclining in a leather chair, a veritable army of make-up artists scampering around him. He looked up in surprise.

'Vogol. How nice.'



Lukos settled himself into a chair. ‘The girl is in the building. The redoubtable Miss Trasker is leading her a merry dance through the corridors as we speak. Are you ready, my boy?’

Saarl waved a sheaf of papers in the air. ‘Just doing my final rewrites on the script. The writers do try their best, but they never get the little touches right.’

Lukos nodded. ‘Just make sure that you’re ready. I want to be able to go live at a moment’s notice.’

‘Your new star...’

‘Is still acting out his role exactly as planned. But I’m expecting a break in transmission in the very near future.’

The Doctor trotted down the TARDIS corridors, peering at his compass. The Master followed, eyes darting around nervously.

The Doctor frowned. Something was not right with his old enemy. Not just the cheetah infection, something else. The Master had been perfectly capable of locating the control node himself, and he was perfectly capable of locating the control room. It was if he was waiting for something.

The Doctor turned to look at him. The Master was staring back along the corridor, sniffing at the air.

‘Anything?’

The Master didn’t look at him. ‘They are all around, I can sense them. Behind the walls.’

The Doctor nodded. His manipulation of the TARDIS

infrastructure had stretched things a bit thin, and ultimately the corridors all led to the same place: the console room. He had created a maze, but its only advantage was that it was a maze that he knew slightly better than the Zzinbriizi.

The corridor continued to wind and spiral. They were close to the console room, the Doctor was sure of it. They turned a corner. A tangle of passageways all merged into one wide avenue. At its end was a door.

‘That’s it.’

The Doctor slipped the compass back into his pocket. Now it was a simple problem. Had the Zzinbriizi got here before them? They would have had to take the more tortuous route, of that he was sure, but they were fast, and far more used to hunting.

The Master was nervous. He licked his lips. 'A long way, Doctor. Do you think we can make it?'

The Doctor's eyes were fastened on the door of the control room.

If this was a trap, then this is where it was going to be sprung. If the Master was leading him into it, then this was where he would show his hand. He had two choices: stay put and wait for the Master to make the next move, or risk it. If he could reach the control console then he had some chance, it would give him some degree of control over what was happening to him.

He took a deep breath and started down the long corridor.

His footsteps echoed around the cavernous space.

Suddenly the console room door seemed a very long way away. The Doctor strained to hear anything unusual above the background throb of TARDIS machinery. He could hear nothing.

He quickened his pace. The Master was right behind him, his breathing quickening. The avenue was lined with elegant pillars. There was nowhere to escape to now, no way out other than that distant door.

The two Time Lords walked silently forward. The Doctor sighed as his hand dosed on the control room door. They had made it.

'Clever, Time Lords.' Barrock's rasping tones made them stop. The jackal was panting heavily, sweat beading on his snout.. Normally we let our prey do all the running.'

The rest of the pack were starting to emerge from the other corridors.

The Doctor tensed, watching the Master from the corner of his eye.

'The occasional run is very good for you. Helps the circulation.'

Barrock smiled. 'You're the Doctor.'

The pack surged forward. The Doctor struggled frantically with the door. It burst open and he and the Master tumbled into the control

room.

‘Quickly Doctor. The console.’ The howl of the jackals echoed down the corridor. The Master slammed the door closed, pushing his shoulder against it.

The Doctor dived towards the hexagonal control console in the centre of the room. His hands danced over the complex controls.

The console gave a sharp electronic burble. The Doctor frowned. Something was wrong.

With a grating, grinding roar the central column started to rise and fall.

‘NO!’ The Doctor bellowed in horror. He struggled to arrest the dematerialisation procedure. ‘We’re on a preset sequence! I can’t override it.’

The Zzinbriizi crashed into the door.

Trasker and Ace stepped into a huge space racked with tier upon tier of seats. ‘It’s where they store the audience seating,’

explained Trasker. She nodded towards a huge metal door.

‘That’s it. Studio One,’

Ace looked cautiously across the storage bay. It was deserted. She crossed to the huge door, looking for some way of getting it open.

Trasker looked at her in amusement. She had led Ace in circles, through a maze of corridors that commissionaires were clearing seconds before she and Ace arrived.

She rubbed the tiny transmitter tucked behind her ear. A director had been in constant touch, relaying instructions from Lukos, letting her know if there were changes to the Doctor’s plans. Now she had been told that the time was right to let Ace get close, for her to be at the studio in time for her next crushing defeat.

Trasker looked over to where Ace was struggling with the door controls. Pointless. They were controlled centrally, controlled by Lukos, and he would only let her get into the studio when it suited him.

Trasker felt a twinge of guilt. The girl was bright and loyal. In many

ways it was like looking at a younger version of herself. She stopped herself, angry that she was letting her concentration waver. She had been given a contract and she couldn't allow her own feelings to get in the way. That was how she had risen to the top of her field, and that was why she was the best. Present the facts, present the truth, take whatever steps, use whatever means to ensure that the story was told.

The people who got in the way were tools, nothing more.

Tools to reach a goal, and if they got hurt along the way...

Trasker gave a grim smile. By the end of the day she would have a lot of money in her bank account. For that reason alone she would put up with the fawning advances of Lukos. He was another tool, and as long as his money kept coming, Trasker would keep working for him.

Suddenly a grinding roar started to fill the room, grating and harsh. Ace's head snapped up in horror.

'Doctor?'

Trasker's earpiece sprang into life. She smiled. It was time.

Ace struggled with the door controls. With a thunderous roar the door began to rise.

'Come on! Come on!'

Ace kicked at them in frustration. The huge shutters had opened just enough, and she squeezed through. Trasker followed her.

Ace stood motionless in the middle of the cavernous space, staring around in despair.

The studio was empty.

Chapter Fourteen

'Three. Two. One. Action!'

Lukos's eyes sparkled with glee as the Master's TARDIS

faded from the screens and Saarl's grinning face loomed into view. The timing had been perfect. The well-oiled machine was running precisely as planned and the Doctor still hadn't got the slightest inkling of the size of the problem he was enmeshed in.

Oh, how Lukos's allies had worried. How they had feared that the Doctor would confound their plans. But Lukos had shown them how wrong they were, had got the Time Lord dancing to whatever tune he wanted, able to watch every move. Able to pre-empt every attempt the Doctor made to extricate himself.

Lukos sighed. It was immensely satisfying. This was the only part of the plan that had its risks, now that the TARDIS

was in the vortex and the thousands of cameras and transmitters set throughout the time ship could not transmit.

Lukos rubbed his chin nervously. This was the only part of the operation that he had no direct control over, this was where he had to place some trust in his allies – and he was a man who trusted no one.

He smiled. Fortunately he had his own contingency plans; he would have to be patient. In the meantime there was the matter of the girl. On the screens Saarl was getting ready with his introductions.

Lukos pressed a communicator. 'Tell Rennie that we're ready for her.'

Gatti tried to pull open the door, but Breame stepped into her way.

'Let me go!'

'Wait!' Breame pushed her back into the room. 'Do you know what they will do to you if you are caught?'

Gatti stopped struggling. Breame was right. It was Ace that they were after. She was unimportant, and that meant expendable.

She sank back into a chair, frustrated and angry. It had taken a while to get the information out of Breame. An endless stream of questions and answers until he had told the truth.

Trasker wasn't an ex-member of staff with a grudge, she was Lukos's top newshound. A journalist with a vicious, amoral streak that knew no boundaries, acknowledged no right of privacy.

Breame had shown her magazines and vidcubes that detailed Trasker's ruthless route to the top. The lives that she had ruined on the way. If Trasker had her claws into Ace...

The latest broadcast had confirmed everything. Saarl was preparing something unpleasant, that much was certain. Gatti stared helplessly

at the screen.

‘We can’t just sit here and do nothing.’

‘Chasing around the corridors could lead you nowhere.

We know exactly where they are going to take her.’

Breame pointed at the television.

‘Of course!’ Gatti scrambled to her feet. It was so obvious.

‘Trasker’s leading her to another studio!’

Breame clapped. ‘Studio Two! Exactly! Well done! Well done! I can see that we are going to have so much fun. You do get so many answers right.’

‘I’m assuming that you know a way for us to get to the studio?’

Breame nodded and scampered round the desk.

‘Let me just get my coat, and my notebook. I must keep score.’

Gatti opened the door and followed Breame out into the basement. He was giggling and chuckling to himself. He pointed at the flight of stairs that Ace and Trasker had used.

‘Now then, I’m assuming that you’ve already discounted that particular stairwell.’

Gatti nodded. ‘That’s the way that Ace went so I’m assuming that one leads to danger.’

‘Capital, capital, it’s a simple process of elimination, do you see?’ Breame smiled at her.

Gatti squinted across the gloom of the basement. Was that a map he was standing next to? She hurried to his side. ‘Does this show the layout of the place?’

Breame tapped his nose and Gatti sighed. She was obviously never going to get a straight answer out of him.

She peered at the map. It seemed to show the fire escapes and main exits for the building. God, the building was vast.

She traced a line of pipes.

‘This comes from the main entrance so we must be here.’

She scanned the map. ‘All the studios seem to be on the other side of the complex.’

Breame pulled a huge red marker from his pocket and crossed out half the stairways.

‘A most logical deduction, Miss Gatti! Only twelve stairwells left to choose from.’ He danced away, scribbling in his book. Gatti jogged after him. That Breame was mad was obvious, but he was the only ally that she had at the moment, and he hadn’t lied to her, not yet. Admittedly he wasn’t exactly forthcoming with his information, but if she kept answering his questions...

She gritted her teeth.

‘I always hated quiz shows.’

Ace held up her hand, stopping Trasker. The studio was empty, but she could hear something.

‘Wait...’

‘What is it?’

‘I don’t know. Listen.’

Ace crossed the huge space and pressed her ear to another door. ‘Sounds like clapping, laughter. I think we’re next to one of the other studios.’

‘Quite right, Ace.’

Trasker’s voice was harsh. Ace looked up, puzzled.

Trasker had a gun pointed at her midriff.

‘You’re about to become a television star.’

The door slid open and Lukos stepped into the light.

‘Perfect timing, my dear. It’s no wonder we keep using you time and again.’ He kissed Trasker’s hand.

Ace spat at her. 'You lying bitch.'

Lukos recoiled from Ace in distaste. 'Oh dear, I do hope that we're not going to have to restrain her.' He peered at her disdainfully. 'We have spent rather a lot of time and money on you, my dear girl, you could at least try and *act* like a star.'

'I'm not going to be part of your sick game.'

'Oh, but you are, my dear. Saarl has just given you a wonderful introduction, and Rennie here has delivered you to the studio with her usual impeccable timing. She's such a professional.'

Ace could feel the rage building inside her. She swung out blindly, but Trasker caught her arm and twisted it painfully behind her back. Ace felt the muzzle of the gun pressing into the side of her face.

'Don't be stupid, Ace. You're not a stupid girl.'

Ace flinched as Lukos stroked her cheek. 'Yes, it would be such a pity if you had to go out in front of the audience with half your face missing. They can do a lot with make-up these days, but not that much.'

Ace went very still. She had stood up to Daleks, Cybermen, monsters of all descriptions, but there was something about the tone of Lukos's voice that made her very, very scared.

Lukos nodded at Trasker. 'Take her through.'

Trasker thrust Ace through the doorway. The applause was louder now, the whooping and cheering almost deafening. She stumbled forward, aware of Trasker's gun in her back. There was a bright light shining at her, dazzling her. She could hear Saarl doing some theatrical introduction. Something about her.

Ace was suddenly pushed forward out into a bright white space.

The noise was deafening. Her eyes streamed as they struggled to compensate for the brightness. She felt a powerful hand grip her arm.

'Ladies and gentlemen, the companion of the Doctor –

Ace!' The applause got louder, the cheering hysterical. Ace's jaw dropped. Ahead of her were rank upon rank of tiered seats filled with whooping Blinnati. Cameras jutted from every conceivable space, the



heat from the lights was stifling. Saarl loomed over her, his face grotesquely made-up. He grinned wildly at her.

‘Say something to your public, young lady.’

Ace turned to run but wherever she looked there were commissionaires, gun barrels trained on her.

‘She seems to be a little shy, ladies and gentlemen, a little stage-struck.’

Ace could hear the audience laughing. She spun around, frantic now. She was trapped, trapped in a madhouse. She tried to dodge past Saarl but he caught her arm, his grip painfully tight. ‘Perhaps she would feel a little more at home in familiar surroundings.’

He waved expansively at the audience.

‘Another exclusive for you lucky people! The time machine of the Time Lords – a TARDIS.’

Cheering and clapping erupted from the audience again as a set of glittery curtains slid open and the familiar police-box shell of the Doctor’s TARDIS trundled sedately on to the stage.

Saarl tore the TARDIS’s key from Ace’s neck. She struggled weakly, but it was no good. They held all the cards.

The Doctor, her and now the TARDIS. She had nowhere left to run. Saarl led her across the stage to an armchair lit by blazing spotlights. Ace slumped into it.

‘That’s right, Ace, you have a rest.’

Saarl leered at the audience. ‘She’s had a busy day, hasn’t she folks?’

He patted her arm. ‘Well never mind, you just sit there and relax, because, Dorothy Gale, better known as Ace, one-time waitress on Iceworld, traveller in time and space, and now companion of the Doctor, This Was Your Life!’

Gatti crept stealthily up the stairwell, Breame hovering behind her. It had taken a while, but by carefully listening to all of Breame’s cryptic clues, and slowly working her way through all the possible routes, she had finally found the correct stairwell. If Breame was right then this one led directly to the audience entrance of Studio Two.

She gripped the piton gun and took a deep breath. 'Your fifteen minutes of fame, girl. Let's just hope it isn't your last.'

She started at the sound of voices ahead of her. Breame shrank back, shaking his head.

'What's wrong?' Gatti hissed.

'Never a great one for crowds, I'm afraid, and Mr Lukos doesn't like me being seen.' He was starting to back down the stairs.

Gatti caught hold of his arm. Breame winced. 'Please don't.'

Gatti released him. He was terrified. God knows what Lukos must have done to him to keep him in this state.

'All right, I'll find her myself. Go back to your office, Gartrold. I'll come and find you if I need you.'

Breame scurried back into the gloom of the basement.

Gatti hoisted the gun to her chest and clambered up the last few stairs.

She emerged into chaos. In front of her were the studio doors but the corridor was packed with hundreds of people, jostling and pushing, waving their tickets in the air, all trying to get in.

Commissionaires were desperately trying to keep the peace, attempting to hold the frenzied crowd at bay.

The bright red sign that indicated live transmission blinked steadily outside the studio. Gatti's heart sank. Whatever Lukos had in store for Ace, it was already under way.

The thing that had once been Greg Ashby sat huddled in the depths of the forest, its robes pulled tight around it. Shivers and spasms shook its body as turmoil raged inside it.

The memories the Fleshsmiths had sought to remove were boiling to the surface, revived by the sight of the woman that he hated, the woman he had once loved.

He pulled out the picture of Trasker and stared at it. His mind was a whirl of pain and memories. He could see fragments of his life, his career. His time with Rennie. The work that they had done together. He could feel the emptiness when she walked out on him, putting her career first, ignoring his pleas for her to stay. He could see Eeji Tek's

mournful face peering at him through the crowds of the gig on Brinhilla, see the same face terrified and agonised as the Zzinbriizi tore him apart.

He tore the picture into fragments, holding out the ragged flesh that had once been his, staring at the unfamiliar skin. He ran a hand over the gleaming lens that jutted from his skull.

‘What have they done to me? What kind of monster have they turned me into?’

With a sob of rage and helplessness, Greg shambled into the depths of the forest.

## Chapter Fifteen

Ace sat motionless in the chair, trying to shut out the laughter, trying to shut out the jeers from the audience. Saarl danced around her, making jokes, taunting her with the TARDIS key, anything to get a laugh out of them.

Somehow, God knew how, they seemed to know everything about her. Where she was born, where she went to school, her probation records, everything. Saarl had dragged out every sordid fact about her life, manipulating the audience with practised ease. On the huge screen behind her was a picture of a great Victorian House – Gabriel Chase, after the fire. The audience were booing, and Saarl was revelling in it.

‘Think, ladies and gentlemen, think about this fabulous piece of our heritage. Think of what it could mean to the people of Earth to have a fabulous building like this standing today. But no. This girl, this vandal, had to ruin it for generations.’

The audience began to shout.

Saarl knelt by Ace’s side. ‘What were you thinking?’

Burning a priceless architectural masterpiece.’

Ace covered her ears. ‘Piss off.’

‘What must your friends have thought?’

‘I said piss off.’

‘What must your mother have thought?’

Ace caught Saarl by the collar, her face white, her voice strained. 'You leave her out of this.'

Saarl shook himself free.

'Pangs of guilt, Dorothy? Concern for your mother?'

Ace lunged at him again. Saarl tripped her and sent her sprawling on the studio floor.

The picture on the screen changed again. A white-haired old lady, her face lined, her expression haunted.

'Do you recognise her Ace?'

Ace stared at the picture. 'Oh no, please no.'

'Do you recognise your mother?'

This was her worst nightmare. This was what she had always asked the Doctor to protect her from. Seeing someone that she knew, someone that she cared about, old and crippled.

The last time she had seen her mother she had been a middle-aged woman, not old, not like this.

She dropped to her knees.

'Yes, you do don't you?' Saarl circled her, like some predatory animal. 'Do you know how old she was when this picture was taken? Eighty-five.'

He turned to the audience again. 'Eighty-five years old, ladies and gentlemen. A frail old lady, who was haunted for most of her life by the loss of her daughter.'

Saarl turned on Ace again. 'Did you ever think what your leaving might have done to her? Did you ever bother to find out how she was doing?'

Tears were starting to roll down Ace's cheeks. The jeers of the audience rang in her ears. She couldn't take her eyes from the picture in front of her. An old woman with the face of a stranger nothing left of the mother she knew, of the mother she had always despised.

Saarl hissed in her ears. 'Did you know how sad she was when she died?'

Ace looked up at him pleading. 'Please.'

'Yes. She died poor and lonely, not knowing if you were dead not knowing if you cared. Her final wish that her daughter would get in touch with her.'

Ace was unable to control the tears now. 'I didn't know! I didn't know,' she whispered. The audience had gone quiet.

The lights dimmed and Saarl was picked out in a single spotlight. The consummate showman, working his audience expertly.

He spread his arms wide. 'But, ladies and gentlemen, we are not here to judge, we are not here to condemn this poor delinquent girl. Time itself has been her judge.'

He grasped Ace by the arms, hauling her to her feet, a clammy hand brushing the tears from her cheeks. 'You travel backwards and forwards through time, but somewhere in your future and our past it all ended, my dear.'

He spun Ace around, pointing her face at the screen. The picture of her mother had been replaced by a camera roaming through a churchyard.

Channel 400 researchers have been working through the night to find this site, and now we have a camera team live from your home planet.'

The camera settled on a gravestone and began to zoom in.

'No.' Ace could hear the terror in her voice.

'The miracle of time travel, ladies and gentlemen, the paradox of time. Here in the studio is a girl in the prime of her life, learning to cope with the crimes of her past, but here, live on channel 400, we can also present you with her future.'

I'll, camera zoomed to a tombstone.

'You're dead, my dear.'

Ace's breath caught in her throat. The name on the grave was hers.

The audience erupted into applause. Ace collapsed.

'Try and hold them off!'

The Doctor danced around the console, desperately punching at the controls.

‘They’re too strong! I can’t hold them.’ The Master struggled with the door, as the pounding from outside shook the console room. The snarling of the Zzinbriizi was impossibly loud.

‘I just need a few more seconds!’

The door suddenly burst inwards, sending the Master sprawling. Zzinbriizi began to swarm into the console room, snarling and drooling. Two of them scooped the Master from the floor, pinning him against the wall. The Doctor reached for the force-field controls and threw the switch.

A shimmering bubble appeared around the console. As the Zzinbriizi launched themselves forward there was a crackle of power, then screeches of pain from the angry jackals. Again and again they threw themselves at the wall of the force field, and each time they were thrown backwards.

The Doctor peered through the mass of bodies, trying to see the Master. He caught a glimpse of him, pinned to the wall, a Zzinbriizi’s razor claws at his throat.

Abruptly the jackals stopped their assault on the force field. The sea of creatures parted and one stepped forward.

The pack leader. Barrock.

Time Lord and Jackal regarded each other through the force-field wall.

The Doctor narrowed his eyes. There was something about the creature, something in the eyes, a glimmer of something that shouldn’t be there.

‘Doctor...’

The Doctor stepped backwards, his mind racing. The Zzinbriizi were animals, nothing more. But this was something entirely different.

The creature smiled, revealing rows of razor teeth.

‘Surprising, isn’t it? To discover what intelligence does for us.’

The Doctor tried to recover his composure.

‘Well, they do say that education broadens the mind. What do you intend doing now?’

Barrock began to pace around the force-field bubble.

‘Well, I had hoped that we would stop you before something like this happened.’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Oh well, you can’t have everything.’

‘Whereas we do have your colleague.’

A smile played over the Doctor’s face. ‘We’re not exactly the closest of friends.’

‘Then I’m sure you won’t mind watching while my pack tears him to shreds.’

The Doctor’s smile faded. Barrock crossed to where the Master was being held. He scrutinised him with slitted eyes. ‘I might have the trappings of civilisation Doctor, but my men are only one step away from their old selves, and they are very hungry.’

‘Let him go, Barrock.’ The Doctor’s voice was low and dangerous.

The jackal turned, all pretence at civility gone. ‘Why?’ he snarled, ‘What have you got left to bargain with?’

He whipped round, razor claws closing on the Master’s neck. The Doctor stared into his old enemy’s eyes. There was no emotion, no fear, just resignation. Endless battles, endless moments when they could have destroyed each other and it all came down to this. Could he just sit back and let his nemesis die?

‘Well, Doctor?’ Barrock began to squeeze. Rivulets of blood started to trickle from the Master’s throat.

‘All right, all right.’

The Doctor stabbed at a control and the force field faded.

Barrock hissed with pleasure and pushed the Doctor away from the console. The Master pulled himself free of the jackals and crossed to the Doctor’s side.

‘Foolish, Doctor,’ he murmured.

‘What did you expect me to do?’ snapped the Doctor. ‘Let them kill you? Let them eat you?’

The Master threw back his head and laughed.

‘Eat me? We’re predators Doctor, not cannibals.’

The Doctor frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

The Master leant close.

‘I mean that the great Doctor has completely missed the point.’ The Master’s face began to ripple, the hair of his beard thickening and growing. His voice dropped into a guttural growl. The Doctor tried to step away, but the pack hemmed him in.

‘You really think that we would allow two Time Lords to plot together? You really think that you had any chance of escape?’

There was a sickening crack as the Master’s jaw extended, his teeth lengthened. Thick wiry fur began to cover his skin.

The Doctor recoiled in horror as the face of his old enemy transformed into the snarling features of a Zzinbriizi jackal.

Barrock gave a howl of triumph.

‘Take him to the Fleshsmiths!’

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Part Three

Chapter Sixteen

The planet Scrantek hung in the wastes of the Brago Nebula, black and ugly, like an inkblot on a masterpiece. Ion storms raged in the vacuum of space, lighting up the tendrils of gas that writhed around the planet.

The surface of Scrantek was barren and grey, clouds of choking ash blown by the constant winds, the colours of the nebula muted by the heavy clouds. The crackling storms were just distant flares in the brooding sky, lighting up the crumbling remains of buildings that dotted the bleak landscape. It was if a thousand cathedrals had been set down here and left to rot.

Amongst the scabrous pillars the air began to shimmer and blur, and a groaning, grinding noise added its voice to the winds. From the twisted tower of one of the buildings, the Fleshsmiths watched the silver cube that was the Master's TARDIS materialise.

‘So, Barrock was to be trusted after all.’

‘The pain that we torment him with is a useful control.’

‘And now, Surgeon General?’

‘Now we become immortal.’

The surgeon general turned from the window. ‘Come. We will greet the Time Lord.’

The Doctor stepped from the TARDIS, shielding his face from the grit and ash driven by the howling wind. He stared about him. The light flickered and danced overhead, casting huge dancing shadows across the ash-covered surface of a courtyard. Above the wind he thought he could hear screams.

He sniffed at the air. Thin, dank and oily.

‘Not the most hospitable of planets.’

Barrock snarled at him. The Zzinbriizi were skittish, their breathing harsh and laboured.

Ahead of them a door opened and light spilled out into the courtyard. A sharp claw was thrust into the small of the Doctor’s back.

‘Move.’

Wearily the Doctor began to cross the wind-ravaged courtyard, the Zzinbriizi like some macabre guard of honour.

He was tired and confused, drained by deception upon deception. That this was a trap was obvious now, but there were so many pieces of the puzzle that he hadn’t even begun to guess at. The scheme unfolding around him was complex and frightening and he was running out of time to find out what it was all about.

Scrantek was not a planet that he wished to be trapped on.

The legends of the Fleshsmiths told of a vicious, mysterious race, the stuff of nightmares. Even the Time lords avoided them. And somewhere there had to be the Master, the real Master – assuming that the Fleshsmiths had left him alive. If he, with all his cunning and guile, had been unable to escape...

They entered a vast cathedral-like building and the door slammed shut behind them. Here the noise of screaming was louder, a constant background choir of pain and suffering. The Doctor shivered.

Two robed figures emerged from the shadows, limping painfully towards him, arm-thick pipes trailing from under their robes and sliding across the flagstone floor. The Zzinbriizi shuffled backwards. The Doctor could sense their fear. One of the figures stopped in front of him. The Doctor peered at it, trying to see the features under the cowl.

‘Good. Good, Barrock. You have done well,’ The voice was low and strained.

The Doctor held out his hand. ‘Good afternoon.’

Abruptly the figure pulled back its hood and the Doctor recoiled in horror. The Fleshsmith’s face was a mass of raw tissue, scarred and pitted. Surgical pins littered the scalp and thin tubes wound their way through the glistening skin. One eye was human, set deep into a black socket, the other was a compound eye, light glinting off its wet surface.

The other Fleshsmiths removed their hoods. All of them were uniquely different, all of them stitched together in different patterns. Beneath the robes the Doctor could see claws and pincers, scales and fur, flesh and machinery, all laced with the pulsing pipes that snaked off into the darkness.

The Zzinbriizi snarled in fear. The first Fleshsmith’s misshapen mouth cracked into a malicious smile.

‘Impressed, Time lord? Impressed with our skills with the knife?’

The Doctor swallowed hard. ‘Well it makes you very...

distinctive.’

‘I am surgeon general of the Fleshsmiths. We have been waiting for you for a long time. Come.’

The creature caught the Doctor’s arm and began to shuffle back into the gloom.

‘What about us?’ Barrock snarled.

The surgeon general didn’t look back. ‘We will have need of you later, Barrock. Wait here.’

The Doctor glanced at the pack of snarling jackals. ‘Your handiwork, I

assume?’

‘Yes, Doctor,’ rasped the surgeon general. ‘A fascinating project. To take the basest of creatures and give it a brain, an intelligence. To give its life meaning.’

‘To make it a more terrible creature than it already is. You have raised them to the point where all they will use that intelligence for will be to become more efficient killers.’

‘Quite.’ The Fleshsmith sounded pleased. ‘That was the intention.’

‘But why?’ The Doctor shook his head. ‘For what possible reason could you want to do it?’

‘All will become clear.’

The Fleshsmith pushed at a set of huge double doors. They swung open silently and coiling vapour swirled out. The Doctor nearly gagged.

‘The flesh banks, Doctor.’

Cramming his handkerchief over his nose, the Doctor followed the surgeon general into the swirling clouds of vapour.

He was used to the variety of nightmares the universe was capable of, but even he was unprepared for the horror that stretched before him. The chamber was vast, ranks of huge pillars stretching into the shadows, their tops hidden in the cavernous gloom. Chains and pipes hung from the distant vaulted ceiling like creepers, and amongst these chains hung the bodies.

There were hundreds, maybe thousands of them, hanging amongst the swirling vapour. Some were intact, some only partially intact with limbs missing and mechanical prostheses grafted in their place. Thick pulsing tubes wound from the bodies to elaborate junction boxes that hummed and whirred, and through the vapour crept the Fleshsmiths, checking connections, poking and prodding at the inert bodies, injecting them with huge vicious-looking syringes. Moans and screams echoed around the pillars and sometimes there was mad, maniacal laughter.

The Doctor stumbled forward, shocked and stunned.

Deeper in the shadows he could see more and more bodies hanging

like meat in a butcher's Window. The range of species seemed to be endless. He could see humans and Draconians, Ice Warriors and Ogrons; in one corner he caught a glimpse of the familiar studded shapes of Dalek casings. The smell was indescribable

He crossed to one of the hanging figures. It was a young man, his arms neatly amputated. An elaborate harness wound around his torso, with chains and pipes snaking into his chest.

A Fleshsmith pushed past the Doctor and inserted a needle into one of the pipes. The man gave a gasp of pain and his eyes snapped open.

He looked at the Doctor in anguish, his mouth trying to get words past the pipe that wound into his gut. Then his eyes flickered shut again and he slumped into his harness.

The Doctor turned in disgust and rage. The surgeon general was being attended by two of his aides, who were disconnecting the pipes that coiled from under his robes and reattaching them to one of the throbbing junction boxes. Thick black fluid splattered across the floor.

The surgeon general looked at him. 'You don't approve?'

'Approve?' The Doctor's voice was barely a whisper.

'What possible reason could this place have? What possible motive?'

'Life,' said the Fleshsmith bluntly. 'It is our means of staying alive.'

'Why?'

'You have seen this planet. You know what conditions are like on the surface.'

The Doctor said nothing.

'We were once a civilised species, Doctor. Fine artists, great builders. We built a civilisation unrivalled in this galaxy, a masterpiece of elegance and beauty.' The surgeon general crossed to one of the hanging bodies and ran a scarred hand over its face. 'We were beautiful and the destruction of our world was nothing more than a tragic accident.'

He looked at the Doctor, his human eye gleaming with anger. 'Our world was destroyed by natural disaster, not by war, not by our own hand. The universe itself decided we were to die, turned the soil to

ash, made our people sterile. But we fought back, fought against the universe itself.'

'And that justifies this?• The Doctor waved his hands at the bodies hanging around him. 'What possible justification could you possibly have for this?'

'We didn't want it to be this way, Doctor. As our people died so we used their bodies to prolong life for the rest of us...

spare part surgery, transplants, prostheses. Soon there were no bodies left to use and so we started to look elsewhere.'

The Fleshsmith stared proudly around the chamber. 'We became masters of flesh, masters of surgery. The creatures here are not dead, they are preserved, alive, and we can utilise their organs, their brains, to revitalise us. We have achieved almost perpetual life, but we constantly need new bodies, new flesh to keep our race alive.'

He picked at the skin on his forearm. It flaked away leaving a weeping sore. 'We break down so quickly these days. The atmosphere becomes ever more corrosive. The nebula. so beautiful, so deadly. By plugging into this repository of flesh we can adapt ourselves to any environment, any atmosphere.'

The Doctor hung his head. 'I can't allow this.'

'You are going to help put an end to it. Submit to us and all this...' The surgeon general gestured expansively, '... could be redundant.'

The Doctor's arms were suddenly grasped by robed figures.

'You are to become a vital part of our make up, Doctor. A regenerative ability. An end to our decay.'

The Doctor struggled to get free but the grip that held him was like iron. He felt something pressed to his arm and a sudden searing pain. He cried out and dropped to the floor, clutching his arm.

A small metal dart protruded through skin and cloth, his jacket was already staining with blood. The surgeon general held up a gnarled control box.

'You will behave, Doctor.' He twisted a dial and the Doctor writhed in agony as wave upon wave of searing pain flooded through him.

‘The pain is powerful enough to keep the Zzinbriizi in line, so please, do as you are told.’

The pain faded, leaving the Doctor panting on the blood-caked gravel. The surgeon general began to shuffle through the bodies. ‘You will follow me to the forge, Doctor.’

Two of the Fleshsmiths dragged the Doctor to his feet. His eyes were harsh and grey. The surgeon general fingered the controls on the box. ‘You have no choice, Doctor.’

Vogol Lukos sat at the head of the conference table, staring arrogantly at the governors. Treeb had called the meeting.

There was concern on the ancient, lined faces.

‘Are you planning on ruining us, Lukos? Just as we’ve got the best ratings this company has ever seen you put in an extended break. What the devil are you playing at?’

Lukos glared at the governor. ‘You may have a vested interest in this company Governor Treeb, but you have no experience of broadcasting. Now sit down and listen.’

Treeb shook with indignation. ‘I’ve never been...’

‘Sit down!’ Lukos’s voice was like a gunshot. Treeb sat back in his seat, shocked and angry.

Lukos took a deep breath.

‘The hiatus in the Doctor’s adventures will only serve to increase our audience share. The switchboards are already jammed with callers wanting to know when the saga will continue, and our advertising premiums are about to go up again.’ He snapped on the screen. Saarl was still on air, whipping his audience into a frenzy.

‘As you can see, dear Roderik is keeping our profile high with his excellent expose of the Doctor’s companion, and we are about to start advertising a documentary showing the inside of the Time Lord’s machine within the next hour. The computer predictions are of 100 per cent of the audience share when we finally announce the continuation of the Doctor’s exploits with the Zzinbriizi. Everyone in this galaxy will be watching Channel 400.’

Lukos paused, letting his words sink in.

‘All right Lukos, it’s a clever plan.’ Treeb gave his praise grudgingly. ‘But what about these mysterious partners of yours, they seem to have rather too much control of this enterprise.’

‘Yes, Governor Treeb, something that has bothered me as well. Fortunately I have made arrangements with our jackal friends.’

‘A deal, with those animals?’ Treeb snorted, ‘Your brain’s addled Lukos.’

‘These are no ordinary Zzinbriizi,’ snapped Lukos. ‘Their leader is a creature with distinct possibilities.’ A smile played across his face. ‘I am so looking forward to seeing how their contribution to our programming turns out.’

The Zzinbriizi huddled in the shadowed cloisters of Scrantek snarling at any of the Fleshsmiths who came too near.

‘So now what, Barrock? There is nothing for us here.’

Kreeth’s , pose wrinkled. ‘It smells of death here, death and old meat.’

‘Patience, Kreeth. Use the brain you’ve been given. The creatures here are old and weak. They’ll die easily enough when the time comes and then we can move on.’

Barrock rubbed at the implant in his temple, the thing that had given him so much pain. When the time came he would rip out the surgeon general’s throat himself, bad meat or not.

‘So why do we wait? You’re not acting like one of us any more, Barrock. You’ve forgotten who you are.’

‘I know exactly what I am!’ Barrock’s lips curled into a vicious snarl. ‘I’m your pack leader and when this is over I will be leader of all the Zzinbriizi, and then, Kreeth, then we will show this galaxy what terror is.’

He caught Kreeth by the throat. ‘But if we get this wrong we’ll be left here to rot, so you do as I say.’

The two jackals snarled at each other. A cowed figure approached them.

‘The arena is ready.’

Barrock smiled. ‘Time to fight.’



## Chapter Seventeen

The surgeon general pushed open a metal door and ushered the Doctor inside.

‘Welcome, Doctor, to the forge of the Fleshsmiths.’

The Doctor said nothing, stepping through on to a balcony overlooking another vaulted room. The gallery was packed with control panels and monitors, technicians monitoring blood flow and DNA sequences. In the chamber below vast machines lined the walls, pipes and cables snaking off into the shadows. Operating tables stood in ordered ranks, black-robed figures shambling between them.

In the centre of the room a huge, ugly device stretched towards the ceiling, a vast collection of tubes and cylinders clustered around a great torus that glistened like wet coal. In its centre, stretched out and pinioned, was the Master, a million needles piercing his flesh, wires and pipes trailed from his body. The machinery throbbed like a heartbeat.

The Doctor stared dispassionately. The surgeon general leant on the balcony rail.

‘Here is where we practise our craft, our art.’

‘Your butchery.’ The Doctor couldn’t take his eyes off the Master, trapped in the machinery. ‘This is where you intend to disassemble me, I suppose.’

‘All in good time Doctor, all in good time. Your public needs to see you one more time before we start to unravel your DNA.’

The Doctor turned, scrutinising the creature through narrowed eyes. ‘What is your connection to Channel 400? You are the ones responsible for the signal I encountered in the vortex aren’t you?’

The surgeon general smiled. ‘We know you, Doctor.

Know of your boundless curiosity. We knew that you wouldn’t be able to resist tracing that signal. From the moment that you landed on Blinni-Gaar you have been acting exactly as we have intended. Why, even your companion has proved useful.’

‘What do you mean?’ The Doctor’s voice was hard. ‘What have you done with Ace?’

The Fleshsmith turned and snapped on a monitor screen.

The Doctor stared at it in horror. Ace lay slumped on the floor of a garish stage set with Saarl dancing around her like an imbecile. The image of her gravestone formed a macabre backdrop to the scene.

The Doctor rounded on the surgeon general but the control box suddenly appeared in the Fleshsmith's hand. 'Careful now Doctor, we don't want you irrevocably damaged. Not yet.'

'Why are you doing this? Why is it so important to parade us in front of the galaxy?'

'Because every viewer watching your discomfort is another few pounds of flesh to add to our stores. A resource to be collected, harvested.'

The Doctor nodded. 'The device in the transmitter. You're using the television signal to carry something of your own, aren't you? Something buried in the transmission.'

The surgeon general regarded him balefully. 'I see that the stories about you are not exaggerated, Doctor. Yes, we are using the Channel 400 programmes to carry a deconstructive enzyme, an agent that will break flesh down into a transmittable form. When the viewing figures reach their maximum – when everyone is watching you, Doctor – we will trigger the enzyme and activate our transmitters. The viewing public will be broken down into their constituent atoms and beamed here. We will fill the flesh banks with pure, raw matter.'

The surgeon general turned back to the monitor, watching as Ace was led from the stage and the Channel 400 logo span into frame.

'One hundred and fifty billion people are tuned in at present, Doctor. One hundred and fifty billion bodies ready to become matter for us to work with.'

He held out a withered claw: 'To be whole again, and to know that body can change, can regenerate, is all that matters.'

'Why me?' asked the Doctor. 'You have the Master. Why do you need me as well?'

'Oh, our Zzinbriizi copy told you most of the truth. The Master did come here hoping that we could engineer a body for him, and we thought that he would provide the DNA sequences that we needed.'

The surgeon general stared down at the figure entwined in the machinery. 'But he is sick, Doctor. His system is ravaged by the cheetah virus, and the Trakenite body he inhabits is simply not what we were after.' He gave a coarse, hacking laugh. 'He really can't call himself a Time Lord any more.'

'Is he still alive?'

The Fleshsmith nodded. 'We still need him to provide the dressing for the final episode, the final battle of the Doctor and his mortal enemy.'

'I want to see him.'

'Yes.' The surgeon general nodded to his aides. 'Remove the Time Lord from the sequencer, then take him and the Doctor to the arena.'

The Doctor was hustled out of the control area. The surgeon general lowered himself painfully into a chair. 'It is nearly time. Get the Zzinbriizi to their positions. I will contact Lukos, and tell him to prepare his final transmission.'

The Fleshsmith's crooked mouth flickered into a smile.

'And then we shall see what the Doctor is made of.'

The Doctor was led through dark winding corridors, deeper and deeper into the core of the planet. It was dark and cold, but here at least the cries of pain and anguish were shut out.

His captors said nothing to him, the pipes that linked them to the flesh bank dragging behind them like transparent tails.

Periodically they would stop and reconnect themselves to another junction box, the thick blood-like fluid pooling around their feet.

The Doctor wondered what could possibly have driven them to live like this, what warped instinct for survival had convinced them that living vampire-like off the fluids and organs of other life forms was better than death. He watched the scarred twisted hands fumbling with the heavy pipes and felt a sudden pang of sympathy. Then the face of the young man with no legs, hanging like some grotesque ornament, swam back into his mind and all trace of compassion vanished from his face.

These creatures were monsters, and it was his job to fight them.

A door loomed in the murky blackness. One of the creatures spun the locking wheel and it swung open. The Doctor stepped inside and the door was slammed shut.

The room was spartan with dark, dripping walls, and was lit by the flickering blue light of a television screen. Even on Scrantek there was no escape from that.

The door creaked open again and a man was bundled into the room, collapsing into a heap at the Doctor's feet.

The Doctor knelt down and gently turned him over. The Master's face was pale and drawn, the cruel line of the mouth bruised and bloody. Under the thin surgical robe the Doctor could see blood seeping from endless puncture marks.

The Master's eyes flickered open.

'Doctor. How nice to see you, in the flesh as it were. Your television exploits have been quite amusing.'

The Doctor caught hold of the Master's arm, hauling him to his feet.

'Here, there's a bench. Sit down and I'll take a look at you.' The Master sat on the hard bench, wincing as the Doctor ran his hands over the needle wounds.

'You know, Doctor, I really never took you for quite such a fool.'

'Really, how so?'

'Sticking your head into the lion's den, to rescue me.' The Master gave a coughing laugh. 'If it wasn't so tragic it would be funny'

The Doctor stood back from the bench and regarded his ancient enemy. 'I assume you've seen everything that has been going on? That the Fleshsmiths have kept you informed?'

The Master nodded. 'Every little scheme and idea, every pointless plan, every failure.' He stared contemptuously at the Doctor. 'If our positions had been reversed...'

'Yes well lucky for you they weren't.' The Doctor began to rummage in his pockets. 'Fortunately for you the Fleshsmiths have decided that I am more use to them than you are. They obviously have impeccable taste.'

With a cry of triumph he hauled out a box of sticking plasters and a tube of antiseptic cream. He waggled them in front of the Master. 'Don't want you getting infected, now do we?'

The Master swiped his hands aside. 'You are an imbecile.'

The Doctor frowned. 'I think I preferred you better as a jackal.'

Light suddenly flooded into the room and two Fleshsmiths shambled in. One of them thrust something into the Master's arms. A black velvet suit.

'You will wear this. The surgeon general wants you looking your best for the cameras.'

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. 'You run a dry-cleaning service? How very quaint. If you could just give my pullover a quick once over...'

'You can laugh, Time Lord,' hissed the shuffling figure, 'But when our DNA sequencer starts to unravel your central nervous system you will be able to do nothing but scream.'

The Fleshsmiths lurched back into the corridor. The Master looked up at the Doctor. 'And for that, Doctor, I can vouch. Personally.'

Lukos sat in the gallery of Studio One watching with delight the show being played out in front of him. The board of governors were safely tucked away in the VIP suite once more. Lukos had made his excuses and left. He was always more at home here in the gallery, watching as the shows were put together. His shows.

Down in the studio, Saarl was still tormenting the Doctor's companion. Lukos felt a thrill of pride. Saarl was always so good at this sort of thing. Oh, he was difficult, obstinate, and ultimately he would have to be disposed of, but in a studio environment, with an audience to entertain, he was a genius.

A studio assistant bustled to Lukos' shoulder, hovering nervously.

'Yes, what?' Lukos snapped.

'Call for you, sir, on the special line.'

Lukos felt his heart jump. 'I'll take it in my office. Tell Roderik to start wrapping up his part of the show, and tell the studio crew that we are going back to the Doctor's adventures imminently!'

Lukos bustled through the cramped control room to his lift. The door slid open and he squeezed himself inside.

The final part of the plan was starting to play out. The final chapter.

There was a soft chime as the lift slid to a halt and the door opened into his office. Lukos scampered across the floor to his desk. He settled into his chair, smoothed his jacket, took a deep breath and activated the videophone.

A scarred and weeping face swam into view.

‘Surgeon General, how nice to see you again. Our visitor has arrived intact I trust?’

‘The two Time Lords are ready to be released into the arena. Are your transmissions ready?’

Lukos was indignant. ‘But of course! You are dealing with professionals, not some two-bit fly-by-night outfit.’

‘Are the figures as you anticipated?’ The surgeon general cut across him.

‘Auntie.’

+ YES MR LUKOS +

‘Audience predictions, if you please.’

+ WITH THE RETURN OF THE DOCTOR TO THE

SCREENS THE PREDICTION IS OF 100 PER CENT OF

THE AUDIENCE SHARE. ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE BILLION VIEWERS. ADVERTISING PREMIUMS... +

‘Thank you, Auntie.’ Lukos smiled. ‘As you can see, Surgeon General, figures are exactly as predicted. Now, as to your promises...’

‘You and your people will be protected, Lukos. The screening that we have installed within your studio systems is adequate.’

‘Nevertheless...’

‘Our transmission will begin in seven minutes. Be ready, Lukos.’

The screen went blank. Lukos narrowed his eyes, a sly smile on his face.

‘Oh I’m ready, Surgeon General. More ready than you could possibly imagine.’

On the huge floating screen Saarl was still practising his art. Lukos punched at a control stud. ‘Tell Saarl to wrap up now! The Doctor is back, live in five.’

## Chapter Eighteen

The door locked behind Ace with a sharp click. The room was small, but there was an easy chair, a bed and a bathroom. A huge bouquet of flowers stood on a dresser with a note reading

‘Welcome to your dressing room’ pinned to the side of it.

Ace slumped on to the bed, totally drained, feeling more alone than she had ever felt in her life. She had been hauled from the stage to the jeers and cheers of the crowd, paraded in front of them and then whisked into an elevator, bundled into the dressing room and told to wait.

She stared blankly at the screen in the corner. Saarl was still there, whipping the audience into a frenzy, a clock counting down to something.

Too tired to care, Ace curled up on the bed and started to cry.

The Doctor and the Master stepped out into a huge amphitheatre. Lights blazed overhead making the underground cavern as bright as day.

The Doctor stared around with interest. Four cavernous tunnels stretched ahead of them, the rock slick with water, razor-sharp stalactites lining the roof. Camera lenses jutted from every chink in the rock and the Doctor was sure the entire arena was wired for sound.

The Master, dressed in the black suit the Fleshsmiths had given him, stared defiantly around him, scrutinising every detail. He was suddenly powerful and alert, a figure far removed from the scarred pale man who had shared the Doctor’s cell.

‘Well now.’ His eyes blazed with expectation. ‘Do you think that they

intend us to fight to the death?’

*‘Nothing so mundane.’*

The surgeon general’s voice boomed from concealed speakers.

*‘You are to continue the struggle that was being played out on Blinni-Gaar. It’s what the audience expects. I believe it’s called continuity.’*

‘So I gather that our Zzinbriizi friends are somewhere here as well?’ asked the Doctor.

*‘Yes Doctor, somewhere. But telling you where would spoil the fun.’*

‘But they can’t destroy us, you still need us.’ The Master was pacing the arena now, growing stronger With every moment, stronger and more dangerous.

*‘Oh they can’t destroy the Doctor – Barrock has his instructions – but there are no such restrictions about you.’*

‘And if I kill the Doctor?’ The Doctor was aware of the Master scrutinising him. He had no doubt that if his old adversary thought that he could bargain for his own life by killing him then he would. He tensed himself to run.

*‘That would be most unwise. You and the Doctor merely have to keep the game going, drawing our audience in. If you co-operate, you may leave when the Doctor is in our DNA sequencer.’*

‘With nothing more than a pat on the back for being a good sport?’ the Doctor asked. ‘Who are you trying to kid?’

*‘The two of you should prove most interesting allies. The transmission is about to begin. I believe the expression is*

*“break a leg”.’*

The Master swung round and stared the Doctor in the face.

‘So, my dear Doctor, it would appear that we are to work together again, at least for the moment.’

‘Listen to me!’ The Doctor was desperate. ‘We are being used, pawns in some evil game. If we can use our brains, use our abilities, then we have a chance, but if I have to keep looking over my shoulder every moment, wondering if you are about to betray me—’



*'Transmission in five.'* The speakers boomed again.

*'Work with me, not against me.'*

*'Four.'*

*'Think about the billions that will die if we don't stop them.'*

*'Three.'*

*'Tell me that for once in my life I can trust you.'*

*'Two.'*

The Doctor held out his hand. *'Please.'*

*'One. On the air.'*

The Master reached out. As he did so the howl of a Zzinbriizi echoed from down one of the tunnels. The two Time Lords span round.

*'I think we should get out of here, Doctor.'* The Master was peering into the gloom of the tunnel mouth. *'This way, I think.'*

He vanished into the tunnel. The Doctor stared after him his hand still outstretched. *'Would you stake your life on it?'*

Taking a deep breath he followed the Master into the darkness.

Vogol Lukos punched his desk in irritation.

*'Damn those scabrous rotting amateurs. No dramatic timing. They should have released the Time Lords into the arena after the start of transmission, not before. I mean what sort of opening shot is that? Backs to camera, no close-ups.'*

He shook his head in disgust. *'No one takes any pride in their work any more.'*

Saarl was slumped on a couch, wiping the make-up from his face. *'I'm surprised you gave them any control at all, Vogol. Not your style at all.'*

Lukos gave a sly smile. *'They have less control than you think, my dear. I'm not one who tends to leave too much to chance. Bad for the business, you know.'*

‘Then what are you up to? Tell me.’

Lukos leant back in his chair, looking thoughtfully at the bulky shape of his chief interviewer sprawled on the couch.

‘All right, my dear, I’ll tell you.’

He reached for his wine glass.

‘Auntie, are our power surge predictions on target?’

+ POWER DRAIN FROM GALACTIC GRID

INDICATES IIDIENCE STILL BUILDING +

‘When are we expecting maximum?’

+ RATINGS COMPUTERS CALCULATE THAT

NNOUNCEMENT OF THE DOCTOR’S IMMINENT

DEMISE WILL ATTRACT MAXIMUM POTENTIAL +

Saarl raised an eyebrow. ‘Demise? Don’t tell me you re going to kill off your new star so soon?’

‘A dead star is always good for the ratings, my dear. I’m expecting the viewing figures for your funeral to go through the roof.’

Saarl choked on his drink. Laughing, Lukos crossed to the sofa and sat beside him, patting a podgy knee.

‘Not that I expect it to happen in the near future, dear boy, but it is always nice to have a contingency plan.’

He settled back, his eyes raised to the ceiling, sipping at his drink.

‘Our mysterious allies are a morbid little race by the name of the Fleshsmiths. A dying breed, tucked out of sight of the viewing public in the treacherous wastes of the Brago nebula.’

‘I’ve heard of them.’ Saarl looked concerned. ‘They’re dangerous, Lukos.’

‘Yes, indeed they are. But they did have an interesting proposition.’

Lukos nodded at the two Time Lords on the screen. ‘It was they who

engineered this scenario, Roderik. They already had the Master, had already come up with a fabulous treatment for his death, but they wanted more. They wanted something that only I could give them.'

He got up and crossed to the screen, running a hand over the smooth black plastic. 'Do you realise how many of these we have sold in this galaxy, my dear? Do you realise just how many people we can reach and influence?'

Saarl opened his mouth to speak but Lukos waved him into silence.

'We are the biggest, most influential company that the universe has ever seen. Bigger than IMC, bigger than InterOceanic, bigger than all the colony conglomerates put together – but do we have respect, do we have political powers. No. We are seen as nothing, as inconsequential, as mere entertainment.' Lukos spat the word. 'Only the Fleshsmiths, only a scabrous, rotting planet of dying freaks can see our potential, see our power.'

Saarl regarded his employer carefully. 'What have they offered you, Lukos? What do they want you to do?'

Lukos smiled horribly. 'They have added some interesting equipment to our transmitter, Roderik. They are badly in need of flesh, of raw materials.' Lukos tapped the monitor screen. 'I have offered them a captive audience. One hundred and fifty billion people is a substantial amount of flesh.'

Saarl went pale. 'You can't, Lukos, even you can't do that.'

'Of course I can't! Do you think I'm stupid?' Lukos snapped. 'We can't possibly afford to lose that many viewers.'

The result would be catastrophic. We'd endanger our advertising revenue and our merchandise base.'

He lowered himself back on to the couch.

'Those pathetic monsters assured me that I would be safe, that everyone in the building would be spared, but what would there be left for us, Roderik? What would the universe be without viewers?'

He paused, his eyes going misty again. 'But to be the saviour of the entire universe. To thwart the plans of the evil Fleshsmiths, live on Channel 400... Ah, my boy, they would have to take me seriously then.'

He gripped Saarl's arm fiercely. 'They will owe me the lives of the entire galaxy, and I will collect.'

'You can prove everything?'

'Everything. Every scheme, every whisper.' Lukos smirked. 'With creative liberties, of course.'

'And the Doctor?' asked Saarl.

'He is a dangerous opponent, Roderik, one who can be extremely unpredictable. Why else do you think I'm letting the Fleshsmiths take all the risks, while we just sit here in comfort and watch?'

'Then how are you going to stop them carrying out their plan?'

Lukos patted Saarl's shoulder. 'Wait and watch, my boy.'

Wait and watch.'

He crossed to his desk and stabbed at a control stud.

'Auntie, activate my personal line. Tell Barrock that it's time.'

Greg Ashby stumbled through the shadowy back streets of Blinni Prime, barely able to cope with what had been done to him. His mind focused only on Rennie Trasker, only his feelings for her kept him going. Helped him shut out the horror.

He staggered through pools of rainwater on unfamiliar limbs, trying to ignore the pixilated glimpses of himself that he caught in reflections. He shied away from people, hid when they came too close. But most of the inhabitants of the city were too wrapped up in their own lives, their own television fantasies, to worry about another shuffling figure in their midst.

Some got a little too close, some did see what lay under the robes, but they scurried away quickly, the fear in their eyes telling Ashby that they would not sleep well ever again.

He stumbled against the rear of a building. A flickering monitor inside gave the alleyway a blue sheen. Ashby stared at the screen.

That was where Rennie would be. With Lukos. In the studio building.

He shouldn't be out here in the rain.

He had to get to the Channel 400 building.

The Doctor pulled himself painfully through the cramped and slippery tunnel. His hands were cut from the razor-sharp rocks his jacket was torn and muddy.

Ahead of him the Master slipped lithely through the stalagmites, Perhaps the cheetah virus wasn't such a burden after all.

Squeezing through a narrow gap, the Doctor emerged into a wide cave. Deep chasms dropped away on either side of the narrow rock ledge. He could hear rushing water far below in the blackness. The Master was motionless in the middle of the cavern, listening. The Doctor struggled over to his side.

'Do you have a fiendishly cunning plan, or is this just a case of running as fast as you can?'

The Master ignored him.

'Because, and I hate to be defeatist, there is nowhere to run.'

The Master rounded on him. 'If we can keep ahead of them then we have a chance. If you would rather wait here...'

'No, but I thought it might be a good idea to buy ourselves some time. Use our brains instead of our feet.'

The Master snarled at him. 'And what great plan do *you* have in mind?'

The Doctor beckoned him to one side, sheltering in the shadows of an outcrop of rocks.

'Look,' he whispered. 'We know this area is wired with microphones and cameras, that the Fleshsmiths know exactly where we are because our every move is televised, every word monitored.'

'Including this conversation.'

'But we don't need to talk, we're Time Lords.' The Doctor reached out for the Master's temple. 'Contact?'

The Master hesitated, then reached out with his own hand.

'Contact.'

Both Time Lords closed their eyes.

Lukos sat forward in his chair, scrutinising the screen.

‘What are they doing?’

Saarl laughed unpleasantly. ‘You could have an interesting new angle to your programming if they carry on like this, Lukos.’

Lukos glared at him.

The Master broke away from the Doctor, his eyes snapping open, He stroked his beard, a smile playing about his face.

‘Ingenious.’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Simple, but effective. We will need a diversion to allow me to set it up though.’

The Master suddenly tensed. ‘Quiet.’

The Doctor cocked his head on one side. Apart from the rushing water he could hear nothing, but the Master was alert, his head tilted back, eyes narrowed.

‘What is it?’ whispered the Doctor.

‘The diversion you spoke of, just not quite the one we wanted.’

The Doctor stared around the cavern. Crevasses and shadows. A million places where something could be hiding, where a trap could be set.

There was a sudden clink of stone on stone.

‘Our Zzinbriizi friends?’ asked the Doctor.

The Master nodded. ‘I can smell them. They are very close. For the moment it might be wise if we found some shelter.’

He turned and had started to make his way along the narrow rock ledge when six foot of fur and muscle dropped out of the blackness.

The Doctor tumbled backwards as the Master and jackal crashed to the ground. Sparks flew from stone as the Zzinbriizi lashed with its razor-sharp claws. The Master lashed out, sending the creature reeling. It scrambled to its feet, snarling.

The Doctor pulled himself up the rock face. A lens glinted from a crack in the rock front of him, swivelling to focus on the conflict in the cavern below. The Doctor ducked as it swung around. He could hear the whirr of servos.

He twisted around to look at the battle below him. The Master's face was contorted into a savage leer, his hands were hooked into twisted claws and his spine was curving horribly.

The Zzinbriizi gave a howl of rage and launched itself forward again. The Master ducked down, his hand raking across the belly of the jackal. The creature gave a scream of pain. Its blood splattered on to the rock. Its savage face was twisted in shock. The Master held up a wickedly clawed hand and smiled.

‘Surprise.’

Howling, the Zzinbriizi launched itself at his throat.

The Doctor looked on in horror as the two figures lurched towards the edge of the abyss. Tearing his eyes away he started to prise the camera away from its housing. The roars of the two savage animals echoed around him.

Saarl clapped appreciatively.

‘I think you may have backed the wrong Time Lord, Vagol. This other one could be a bit of a crowd puller.’

Lukas's eyes were shining with excitement. ‘Indeed, my allies kept this little development a surprise from me. We may have to think about striking a deal with this Master, once this is over.’

Saarl peered at the screen. ‘Where's the Doctor, though? I can't see him.’

‘Oh, vanished into the rocks.’ Lukas waved his hands impatiently. ‘He's not where the money is. Look at the camera angles they're getting, my boy. This is a class act.’

‘Would you care to place a little wager, Lukas?’ Saarl was reaching for his wallet.

‘I didn't know you were a gambling man, my dear,’

murmured Lukas.

‘A thousand credits on the Zzinbriizi.’

‘Done, my boy, done.’

The Doctor had the camera out of its housing and was fumbling with the delicate wiring. Cables snaked away into the rock face. He had to get this right.

Back in the cavern the Zzinbriizi was being forced backwards, its neck stretched back. The Doctor saw the Master’s lips curl, revealing savage pointed teeth.

‘Oh no.’

He knew what was coming, but he couldn’t tear his eyes from the battle in front of him.

There was a horrible gurgling scream of pain and the Zzinbriizi dropped backwards into the abyss, blood fountaining from its torn throat.

The Doctor’s fingers were a blur inside the camera.

‘Here goes nothing.’ He twisted at a wire.

‘Hah! You never were a good gambler, Roderik, my dear.’

Lukas swept the pile of notes from the table and took a mouthful of wine.

‘You know I rather think you might have been right, my boy. The Master is by far the more entertaining of the two, don’t you think? When all this is over I really must see about offering him a contract.’

The screens went blank.

Lukos almost choked on his drink.

## Chapter Nineteen

Ace stared in horror at the blank screen. She had watched the Doctor’s telepathic conference with the Master. Watched the ferocious battle with the Zzinbriizi. Now there was nothing.

She punched at the television. ‘Bastard thing!’ The screen was a wash of static. Then the Channel 400 logo spun into place and an announcer started apologising for the loss of transmission.



Ace hurled herself at the door. She had to get out of this room.. She was angry with herself for letting Saarl get to her.

He had caught her off guard, got through her defences. Now she was angry – very angry – and someone was going to pay.

The door was solid. Ace kicked at it in frustration. Right.

The door was a no-go. She paced the room. It was tall, the only window a skylight set high in the gently curving ceiling.

All the furniture was built in, there was nothing that she could use to get to that window. Nothing except for the vase of flowers.

Ace lashed out and sent the vase crashing to the floor. She dropped back on to the bed. Getting angry in here wasn't going to help anyone.

‘Think! Think!’

There was a harsh crack and glass and plaster showered down on her. She dived for cover.

She looked up gingerly. A piton had materialised in the wall. Tied to it was a thick rope.

Gatti's face appeared at the shattered skylight.

‘Nothing good on TV, then?’

The surgeon general hissed in alarm at the static-filled screens.

‘What has happened? Why do we have no picture?’

Aides scurried around him in panic. ‘The cameras in that section of the arena have malfunctioned, Surgeon General. We are attempting to rectify the fault.’

The surgeon general snatched up the control box. ‘If Barrock has disobeyed us...’

‘No, Surgeon General. The Doctor's life signs are still stable. He is still alive.’

‘Get me pictures. The Time Lords are devious and unpredictable. I must know what is happening!’

Gingerly the Doctor clambered back down the rock face, the Innards

of the video camera clutched in his hand. The Master stood panting on the rock ledge, his mouth dripping and red.

The Doctor circled him cautiously, peering into the blackness below.

‘Hungry were we?’

The Master pulled a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and started to wipe the blood from his mouth.

‘I trust that was a sufficient distraction.’

The Doctor wagged the circuitry at him. ‘For the moment no one can hear us or see us. Now I just need to set up a loop in the memory chip. Sit down.’

The Master settled on one of the rocky outcrops, his blood-soaked handkerchief dropping to the ground. The Doctor scampered around him, squinting at various points around the cavern, peering along the length of his umbrella.

The Master swung around in irritation. ‘This is taking too long.’

‘Sit still!’ snapped the Doctor. ‘There’s only enough memory for this to work for a couple of seconds.’

He hopped up on to the rock next to the Master and snapped open his pocket watch. ‘Smile, you’re on candid camera.’

The Master grimaced at him.

‘Just look as though we’re talking, just for a few more seconds.’ The Doctor didn’t take his eyes from the read-out.

‘There!’ He sprang from the rock, thrusting the camera circuitry into his pocket. ‘A four-second loop on all camera circuits. Now all we need to do is find a way out of the cavern.’

‘We might be able to arrange that.’ The rumbling voice rang through the cavern. The two Time Lords started.

All around them, crouched amongst the rocks, were the Zzinbriizi.

Saarl looked at Lukas in shock. ‘You’re off air, Vogel.’

Lukas was livid. In a blind rage he hurled his wine glass across the room. ‘Stupid halfwit of an animal! May he rot on that cess pit of a

planet.'

Saarl stared at the purple face of his employer, 'Animal?'

'Barrock! That mindless, cretinous, creature!' Lukos kicked over a table, sending it tumbling across the floor.

'Barrock? You did a deal with that Zzinbriizi animal?'

'Those stinking creatures on Scrantek gave him intelligence, turned him into something that could be bargained with. All I did was make him a better offer.' Lukos turned and bellowed at the static-filled screen. 'But taking me off the air was not part of the plan!'

The Channel 400 continuity announcer was making smooth, unhurried apologies.

Auntie's soft voice echoed through the room.

+ AUDIENCE FIGURES FALLING. GOVERNOR

TREEB WISHES TO TALK TO YOU, MR LUKOS +

'Tell Treeb he can rot in hell!'

Lukos turned on Saarl, hauling him to his feet. 'I'm putting you back into the studio.' He swept across the office, dragging the presenter behind him.

'But what am I going to do?' whimpered Saarl.

'Anything!' bellowed Lukos. 'We'll get the girl, do what you like with her, just get me that audience back!'

Lukos was panting with rage. Someone had upset his plan, and someone was going to suffer.

Saarl scurried after him. 'She could break down completely if we keep going, Lukos.'

'Then break her! Tear her apart in front of the baying masses... Auntie!'

+ YES, MR LUKOS +

'Tell them to prepare the studio. We're coming down!'

Ace clambered to the top of the rope, hauling herself through the shattered remains of the skylight.

Gatti grinned at her. 'Thought I'd forgotten you?'

'Well, I did have my doubts.'

Breame clapped his hands in glee. 'Capital, absolutely capital.'

Ace looked quizzically at Gatti. 'We seemed to have gained an unexpected ally.'

Gatti nodded. 'I persuaded him to help. He told me all about Trasker. She's been working for Channel 400 all along, Ace.'

'And believe me, the bitch is going to regret that.' Ace reached for the piton gun.

Gatti caught her hand. 'Ace, I saw what they did to you, your mother, your gravestone...'

'Later, Gatti.' Ace took the piton gun from her. 'We've got more important things to do.'

She looked around. They were on a balcony. She could see the roofs of the studio buildings and, further in the distance, the lights of the city. On the other side of a huge picture window that opened on to the balcony there was a long high room filled with tables. Ace stepped through the window. A bar stretched along one side of the room.

'Where the hell are we, the Queen Vic?'

Breame danced over to her side. 'Beautiful isn't it? No one has the time to come up here and look any more. All far too busy with deadlines and schedules.' He coughed. 'Though the docking of wages for every minute spent up here may also have had something to do with it.'

He leant against the glass, looking out over the city. 'I used to come up here all the time. Do you know how many commercial premises you can see from this vantage point?'

'It's the company bar.' Gatti was hauling the rope back up through the skylight. 'I asked Breame for help when I saw what they were doing to you and he showed me the way up here. It runs the whole length of the studio complex. No one seems to use it. They're all worked too

hard, I guess.'

Ace nodded. 'Nothing about this place seems to encourage fun. Still, it gives us a breathing space.'

'Until they notice a broken window and an empty dressing room. They weren't planning on letting you rot down there Ace. You've got another appointment with Saarl – it's been advertised.'

'Right.' Ace was grim. 'Then it's time we brought a little excitement into Vogol Lukos's life.'

She pulled Breame away from the window. 'Where will I find him?'

Breame grinned inanely. 'Now that's a high-scoring question, very high scoring indeed. I'll have to think of...'

Ace caught him by the collar, slamming him back against the window. 'I don't have time for any more of your games, Breame. How do I get to Lukos's office?'

She raised the piton gun.

Breame stared down its barrel. 'Weapons and threatening behaviour could be constituted as cheating and lead to disqualification, you know.'

Gatti laid a hand on Ace's arm. 'I wouldn't have got you out without his help.'

Ace lowered the gun. Breame pulled his jacket straight.

'That's better.'

He beamed at Gatti. 'Bonus point to you, my girl. Mr Lukos has climbed the ladder of success to the very top. But why is success always a ladder, hmm?'

'And why are the climbers always snakes?' Ace stared at the ceiling. 'He's got a penthouse suite.' She started along the length of the bar. 'No doubt he'll have a personal lift somewhere.'

Breame nodded vigorously. 'Oh yes.'

Gatti looked at Ace incredulously. 'You're not suggesting that we just get into his personal lift, push the button for penthouse suite and say "Hi"?'

‘I wasn’t planning on saying “Hi”.’

There was a cry of anger from below. Breame crossed to the balcony and peered through the remains of the skylight.

‘I rather think your escape has been noticed.’ He looked at the girls solemnly. ‘No prizes for guessing that they’ll work out where we’ve gone.’

‘Then we had better get in to see Mr Lukos as soon as possible,’ said Ace.

‘The lift?’

‘No.’ Ace shook her head. ‘I think we’ll take the scenic route.’

Lukos kicked a chair across the dressing room, his face flushed with anger.

‘Damn that unco-operative devil of a child.’

He stared up at the shattered skylight. ‘Get security up to the bar now! I want her in chains. In chains, do you hear me?!’

A runner scurried out of the room.

‘Too many new stars, Vogol. You really should choose more carefully in future.’ Saarl was looking around the dressing room in amusement.

Lukos rounded on him, his eyes blazing. ‘Get your useless bulk down to the studio. Without the girl we have a gap in the schedules. I want you on air with your feature on the Time Lord’s time machine in minutes.’

Saarl glared at him, then turned and flounced off down the corridor. Lukos ground one of the scattered flowers under his boot.

‘You have caused me a good deal of trouble, Miss Ace, and the next time that you appear on screen will be unpleasant for you. Very, very unpleasant.’

The alarm went off in the security booth.

Briggs and Rickett looked at each other.

‘I told you,’ said Rickett smugly.

Reg Gurney burst into the room. 'What the devil are you men sitting there for? You've heard the alarm and you know the drill! Get your horrible arses over to the main building.

We've got errant girl to apprehend!'

Rickett groaned.

'Here we go again.'

Eyes gleaming, Barrock stood on an outcrop, a bestial leer on his face. He regarded the Master curiously.

'I'm impressed, Time Lord. And grateful. Kreeth was beginning to become an irritation.'

'I'm glad I could be of service,' purred the Master.

Barrack started to pick his way down through the rocks, unshouldering the blunt ugly gun he carried. The rest of the Zzinbriizi started to close in.

The Doctor started to back away but the Master stood his ground, unphased by their approach.

The Doctor looked at him in alarm. 'Is this it, then? Is this the point where you throw me to the wolves?'

The Master said nothing, just continued to dab at his bloodstained mouth.

The Doctor's face darkened. 'We haven't got time for these games. It is only a matter of minutes before someone realises what we have done. We have to get out of here before then.'

He turned towards the approaching jackals, his voice low and hypnotic. 'Barrock, listen to me. You've been given a modicum of intelligence, so listen.'

The rest of the Zzinbriizi were priming their guns. The whine of power packs filled the cavern.

'You are just a tool, an assassin! The Fleshsmiths are never going to let you out of here alive.'

'Oh, I know that, Doctor. But the Fleshsmiths are no longer of any consequence.'

The Doctor nodded at the blasters the Zzinbriizi were holding. ‘Hardly your style, are they? A little impersonal for you, I would have thought.’

Barrock nodded. ‘Oh, I agree, Doctor. Guns are no substitute for the claw. Efficient, yes, but lacking in that personal touch.’ He raised his weapon, pointing it at the Doctor’s head. ‘But for raw power they are difficult to beat.’

He swung the blaster towards the cavern wall and nodded at his pack. There was a shattering roar as their guns blazed.

The Doctor clamped his hands over his ears.

Rock shattered, filling the cavern with choking smoke.

The guns roared again.

The noise of gunfire faded. The Doctor crossed to Barrack.

‘You’re not playing by the Fleshsmiths’ rules are you? You have ideas of your own.’

Barrock’s lips curled back in a toothy smile. ‘We have a far richer paymaster, now. I have ambitions Doctor, and you are lucky that at the moment I still need you alive.’

‘So who are you working for, I wonder?’ The Doctor rubbed his chin. ‘Channel 400? Have they offered you a show of your own? You really ought to get yourself a decent agent before you enter into any negotiations, you know...’

‘Will you stop your endless prattling!’ The Master pushed him out of the way. ‘We must get to my TARDIS.’

Barrock pushed the muzzle of his gun into the Master’s face. ‘All in good time. There are deals that we need to strike first.’ The jackal pointed at the side of his skull. ‘In here is a transmitter, a camera implanted by the Fleshsmiths. I want it removed. It takes a lot of effort to stop revealing our every move.’

The Doctor peered around the Master’s shoulder. ‘I thought they had a device that kept you under their control.’

Barrock held up a small surgical instrument. ‘And Vogol Lukos provided me with the means of removing it.’



‘Ah! Far better than a talk show contract.’ The Doctor reached out. ‘I don’t suppose I could borrow that for a moment?’

Barrock closed a clawed hand around the instrument. ‘No, Doctor, not yet. You are our means of getting off this planet, and it is useful to have a hold over you.’

‘We are wasting time,’ said the Master impatiently. ‘We should get out of here.’

‘Agreed.’ Barrock turned to his pack. ‘Spread out. Kill anyone who gets in your way.’

The Zzinbriizi vanished through the gaping hole in the cavern wall.

The Doctor stepped through the hole into cool darkness.

Ahead the foundations of the Fleshsmiths’ Citadel stretched into the distance, vast stone arches dark and wet, the background throb of the distant machinery like a heartbeat.

He looked back at the cavern from which they had just escaped. It was a vast tower of scaffolding and timber, a stage set constructed amidst the vaults, its top lost amongst the coiling stonework.

He shook his head. The lengths that the Fleshsmiths and their allies had gone to were phenomenal. The trap had been perfect. A mystery to solve, ferocious monsters, an old enemy.

He glanced over at the Master, who was studying his new surroundings through slitted eyes. The Doctor wondered if the Fleshsmiths knew quite what they were up against. The Master wasn’t known for his forgiving nature, and they had put him through considerable pain – but they still had a hold over him, they still had a bargaining chip. The body. A new unsullied body for him to transfer his consciousness into.

All the Doctor’s instincts screamed at him to run, to get away from the Master at the first opportunity. He couldn’t be trusted, he could never be trusted, But there was a part of him that just wanted to help, wanted to get the Master the body he so desperately needed. The Doctor sighed. Perhaps then he could be content. Perhaps then that overwhelming drive would leave him and he could have some measure of peace.

Barrock was suddenly in front of him, beady eyes drilling into his

own. 'Plotting, Doctor?'

The Doctor smiled wearily. 'No, Barrock. There are already far too many plots for me to deal with.'

'Good.' The Zzinbriizi raised the gun. 'Because I will not hesitate to kill you if I suspect treachery.'

He turned away.

'It's a burden, isn't it? This new intelligence, this ability to reason.' The Doctor's voice echoed around the cavernous gloom.

Barrock turned slowly, anger flaring in his eyes. 'What do you mean?'

The Doctor was scratching at the dirt on the floor with the tip of his umbrella. 'I mean that life was so much easier for you when it was just the hunt, you and your prey, nothing more.' He looked up, his eyes dark and dangerous. 'How long since you were just an animal of instinct, Barrock? How long since the Fleshsmiths gave you the ability to deceive, to be treacherous, to revel in the death of your own kind?'

'Kreeth was an irritation,' snarled the jackal. 'He was getting in the way of my plans.'

'He was a Zzinbriizi, acting with his claws not his brain.'

'He was an animal.'

'And what are you, Barrock?' The Doctor stepped closer, his voice low. 'What schemes are being hatched in that new brain? What plans are you laying?'

He waved an arm around. 'You are surrounded by beings to whom treachery is an ancient art, not a new toy. You think that you can control what is going on but every move you make has been anticipated, catered for.'

Barrock's claws flashed to the Doctor's throat. 'Careful, Time Lord. You are becoming an irritation, as Kreeth did.'

The Doctor didn't flinch. 'Then perhaps my instincts are a sharp as his.'

'And perhaps you will soon be as dead as he is.'

The Doctor shot a look at the Master, remembering the blood lust in

his eyes, his teeth tearing at Kreeth's throat.

'You might be right, there.'

Barrock leant close, his hot breath washing across the Doctor's face.

'The Fleshsmiths gave me enough intelligence to be of use to them, Doctor, enough so that I would be a useful tool. But my kind has been used by other beings for too long. Hunted for sport by creatures with no courage, no skill. Treated like pets, like slaves. We are creatures of raw power, true, but to give that power a reason, a goal...'

He bared his teeth. 'I intend to take this world, Doctor, take this world and the spineless cripples who inhabit it. Oh, it suits my paymasters on Blinni-Gaar that I do so, but there our common interests end. When I return to Ottrase, it will be as the greatest pack leader the planet has ever seen. I will bring my people out of the Stone Age and then the universe will really see what we are capable of.'

He released his grip on the Doctor's throat. 'Enough talk.

We must move.'

He pushed the Doctor forward, to where the Master was waiting.

'Having a little chat with our captors, Doctor? Haven't you been warned about caged animals?'

The Doctor rubbed at his throat. 'These particular caged animals are preparing to start a blood bath.'

'Then at least our captivity should have some entertainment value.'

'Is that all this is to you?' exploded the Doctor. 'A diversion? An amusement?'

'Yes!' spat the Master. 'Everything that I have been put through is because of you, Doctor, because of your gullibility!'

I would gladly see the rotting scum of this planet die at the claws of the Zzinbriizi because of all that they have done to me...'

'But not until your new body is safely tucked away inside your TARDIS.'

'Precisely. And nothing and no one is going to get in the way of that. Something that you should remember, Doctor.'

The Master strode off, following the Zzinbriizi deeper and deeper into the vaults. The Doctor sighed. He was running out of allies, and he was running out of time.

## Chapter Twenty

The tunnels of the vaults had become low and dark. The Zzinbriizi were starting to get anxious, uncomfortable in the enclosed darkness.

Barrock held up a clawed hand, stopping the pack.

Ahead of them was a low stone arch, and light. The Doctor frowned. There was a smell, musty and harsh.

Barrack waved two of his pack forward. Swiftly they vanished through the archway. The Doctor glanced at the Master. He was sniffing at the air.

Barrack's men reappeared at the mouth of the tunnel beckoning them forward.

The Doctor felt a blaster prodding at his back and he shuffled forwards down the tunnel.

He emerged into a huge circular vault. An archway led into a second identical chamber, it in turn leading to another, and another. like the rest of the planet everything was constructed of dark rotten stone, the pipes and machinery of the Fleshsmiths were scattered everywhere. All around the walls were barred doors, pens. Inside the Doctor could see frightened animals, painfully thin, watching them with mournful eyes.

The Master pursed his lips. 'An abattoir?'

The Doctor crossed to one of the pens. It contained dozens of animals, from dozens of different planets. He rubbed the nose of one of them. 'None of these are indigenous to this galaxy. They must be cargo from the ships, or bred from embryos.'

'We are the leftovers, the ones that they couldn't use.'

The Zzinbriizi dropped into crouches at the sound of the voice, their guns raised.

The Doctor peered through the cage bars. A grizzled old man lay amongst the filth, his hair matted and dank, his eyes sunken in hollow

pits.

‘How do you do. I’m the Doctor...’

Barrock thrust him out of the way. ‘Who are you? What is this place?’

The man struggled to his feet and hobbled painfully to the bars. ‘We are the ones that the Fleshsmiths could not use for their foul surgery. The weak, the infirm, the sick.’ He gave a deep hacking cough. ‘We are kept in case they have need of a disease, or as nutrients for the ones they keep alive.’

‘They use you as food?’ The Doctor could barely keep the disgust from his voice. ‘How many of you are there?’

The man shook his head. ‘Not many.’ He gestured to huddled shapes in the dark. ‘You don’t last long down here, not long.’ He started coughing again.

The Doctor looked around for the door control. A complex set of levers was set into the wall. He crossed the chamber and reached out for it.

Barrock swiped his hand aside. ‘You are overstepping your mark, Time Lord!’

‘I am not leaving these people here to rot, Barrock!’

Barrock towered over the Doctor’s diminutive form, his lips curled back in a vicious snarl.

‘Fine.’

Barrock turned and fired into the cage.

‘No!’ The Doctor threw himself at the jackal. Barrock swiped him aside.

The Doctor dropped to the cold floor, rolling as he fell.

Barrock loomed over him, and thrust the gun into his face.

The Doctor stared defiantly up at him. ‘You will pay for that, Barrack.’

The gunshot was like a thunderbolt, a blaze of energy arcing across the chamber. Stonework exploded above the Doctor’s head. Barrock spun, his gun blazing.

The cowed shape of a Fleshsmith stood in the entrance to the chamber, an ugly stump of a weapon in his hands. As the Doctor watched, one of the Zzinbriizi was struck by a surge of energy. With a horrible guttural roar it dissolved into a mass of bubbling tissue.

Barrock bellowed in rage and fired his gun again. The Fleshsmith was torn apart in a hail of blaster fire. Barrock raced across the floor. In the next chamber more Fleshsmiths were massing. Barrock's gun roared again and the Zzinbriizi threw themselves into the fray.

The Doctor scrambled to his feet. The cell was full of bodies, blood was soaking into the dirt floor. Across the chamber the Master was edging back towards the entrance.

Barrock and his pack re-emerged victorious, the barrels of their guns smoking, their claws red.

The Doctor's hand grasped the door control.

The Time Lords' eyes met.

The Master gave a thin smile.

The Doctor threw the lever.

The underground chamber erupted into pandemonium as the cell doors swung open. Animals of all descriptions surged from their confinement, desperate to escape, and stampeded past the Zzinbriizi pack. One of the jackals threw itself at them and brought one crashing to the floor. With a baying howl the Zzinbriizi tore the throat from its victim.

The smell of blood seemed to unleash a primal need in the pack. They fell on the terrified animals, casting their guns aside.

'No! Stop this!' The Doctor could hear Barrock screaming amongst the howls.

The Doctor looked around for the Master, but he was gone. He swung round. A corridor led off into darkness. He started towards it.

A blaster bolt tore a smoking hole in the stonework next to his head. Across the chamber, through the tide of screaming animals, Barrock stared at him, his eyes blazing, his pack reduced to the savage predators they truly were.

The Doctor raised his hat, and vanished into the gloom.

Barrock threw back his head and screamed in rage and frustration.

Reg Gurney pounded up the emergency stairs, his heart racing.

He didn't understand all these plans of the director-general.

Letting people escape from the complex, then letting people into the complex, not apprehending them when he had the chance. It was politics, internal politics and he didn't like it.

He was a simple man, trying to do what he thought was a simple job. Keep order, keep discipline, keep the employees safe. Now, at least, his instructions were clear. Apprehend the girl. Use any force necessary. Bring her to Studio Two.

That was what he liked. Clear, unambiguous instructions.

He had chosen six of his best men, all of them with tape guns.

He could have taken the girl with less, he had no doubt about that, but a show of force was always good for the work force, let them know who was really in control. A little bit of healthy respect was always useful.

He and his men had pushed their way through the studio audience, spreading out and taking stairways at either end of the bar. There was no way the girl could escape. He had isolated the lifts. She was trapped. Reg felt a surge of pride. It was a well-planned military operation. He had co-ordinated hundreds of them when he was in the army. He just wished that he was a little younger, and that the stairs weren't quite so steep.

Panting, he reached the top landing and stopped, trying to calm his pounding heart. He checked his gun, setting the tape streams to maximum. Not for the first time he ached for a real gun, a real unit to command. Briggs and Rickett hovered behind him, jittery and nervous. He pulled himself up to his full height, straightening his scarlet uniform.

'Right,' he hissed. 'I'll take point. You next, Briggs, Rickett, keep the rear covered. Are the others in place?'

Briggs checked his radio and nodded.

‘Good.’ Gurney swung up his gun. ‘As soon as you see her give her everything you’ve got. The little bitch isn’t going to get away this time.’

He kicked open the door.

The commissionaires swarmed in. The bar was in darkness, only the light of the distant city filtering through the windows. A shadowed figure could be seen in the centre of the room.

‘There she is! Fire!’ bellowed Gurney.

The bar was filled with harsh cracking noises and acrid smoke as six guns blazed, ribbons of red tape billowing across the room. There was a muffled cry and the figure crashed to the floor. Gurney gave a shout of triumph. ‘Got her!’

He stamped across the bar, slinging his gun on to his shoulder. He grasped the fallen figure and dragged it to its feet.

‘Get some lights on in here, damn it!’

Rickett fumbled with the light switch.

The lights snapped on.

Gartrold Breame smiled out from his red tape cocoon.

‘Good evening gentlemen. I’m afraid that you’ve lost this round, and that the girls have played their joker.’

Ace and Gatti clung to the wall of the Channel 400 building, grimacing as the wind threatened to pluck them off and hurl them to the ground.

Ace shifted her grip, her fingers digging into the tiny gaps between the concrete blocks. She struggled with the rope.

Without climbing boots and without proper shackles it was almost impossible to secure themselves properly. She and Gatti had the rope tied around their waists, but it was hampering their mobility.

They were about five metres above the balcony. Ace twisted her head to look down. Below her was the car park, the thousands of vehicles little more than kids’ toys from this height. As she watched one of Gurney’s men stepped out on to the balcony.



Her heart jumped. If Breame had told the commissionaires how she and Gatti had escaped then this would all be over very quickly. The man did a quick inspection of the balcony, then peered over the edge. Gurney came out to join him.

‘They couldn’t have got out that way, sir.’ Ace struggled to listen over the biting wind. ‘Mr Breame was telling the truth. They must have got past us on the stairs.’

‘How, damn it? How?’

The two men stamped back inside the bar. Ace let out her breath and shot a look at Gatti.

‘I think we’d better get some distance between us and them.’

Gatti nodded and began to haul herself up the sheer wall.

The two girls made painfully slow progress, Ace using the piton gun wherever possible, aware that every shot threatened to alert the commissionaires to their presence.

Eventually the two of them clung beneath the lip of the roof. Gatti was shivering, her hands almost white.

‘I’m not sure how much more of this I can cope with, Ace.’

Ace craned her neck. ‘This has got to be it, Gatti. Top of the building. We’ve just got to get over this overhang and we’re home and dry.’

Gatti cast a practised eye over the jutting concrete. ‘It’s not a simple climb Ace. You’re not going to be able to use the gun. One of us is going to have to get over first and then let the rope down for the other.’

‘It’ll be me then.’ Ace’s face was grim. Gatti tried to argue but Ace shook her head. ‘Look at you. It’s as much as you can do just to hang on.’ She shuffled over, letting the rope take her weight. ‘Tie yourself on, and give me as much slack as you can.’

Gatti hooked the rope through the end of the piton, pulling herself tight to the wall. Ace took a deep breath. ‘Wish me luck.’

Roderik Saarl stepped out on to the stage in Studio Two. The last crash of drums faded away, the spotlights lit him like a beacon.

He held his arms wide. A hush descended across the audience. Saarl

smiled. This was his moment, this was what he lived for, this was what he was.

The world faded into nothingness, nothing existed beyond the walls of the studio. Every eye was on him. Hundreds of billions of people all waiting to hear him speak, all watching Roderik Saarl.

He felt a huge surge of pleasure. To think that he had made it. To think that from his humble beginnings, the son of a shuttle loader, a nobody from a backwater planet, he could command any fee he wanted and people hung on his every word. He remembered the bullies back home, the critics, the tormentors. No one would dare now. In the temple of television he was a god!

He crossed the stage, flicking his eyes over his expectant audience, then turned to the camera. 'Ladies and gentlemen, good evening.' He kept his voice low and mysterious.

'Tonight will see the final round in a contest that has kept you gripped and astounded. A mysterious traveller in time and space pitted against almost insurmountable odds. The Doctor triumphant, or the Doctor defeated? Here, live, you will see its resolution.'

The audience started to cheer. Saarl held up a hand, calming them.

'But that is later, for the moment we have another first.'

Across the stage a curtain was rising, the police-box shape of the TARDIS sliding out on to the stage once again.

'Tonight, we at Channel 400 can reveal to you our studio audience, and you, the billions of viewers at home, a wonder of the universe, a technological miracle, the machine that transports the Doctor through time and space. For the first time we take you inside a TARDIS, time machine of the Time Lords of Gallifrey!'

The audience erupted into cheers and applause.

The cramp in Ace's fingers was unbearable. She gritted her teeth against the pain and shifted her grip. She was halfway around the overhang, all too aware of the dizzying drop below her.

There were enough handholds on the rough concrete, but the wind was biting, the surface wet. The dangling rope whipped around like a mad thing. Her muscles screamed at her for relief.

‘Don’t stop, Ace. Keep it moving or you’re going to lock up.’ Ace couldn’t see Gatti any more, but a constant stream of encouragement was shouted from below.

Steeling herself, Ace pulled herself upwards, boots scrabbling for new purchases. There! The edge was in view now, just a few more inches.

She loosened her grip with her right hand and reached for the lip. It was tantalisingly close, her fingers brushing the edge. Forcing her muscles to the limit she stretched.

Her fingers caught hold just as her feet slipped from the wall.

Ace heard a scream whipped away by the wind, but she wasn’t sure if it had been Gatti or herself. She dangled over nothing, hanging by one arm. Crying out with the pain she scrabbled desperately for a grip with her other hand. The concrete wall was slippery and smooth, the wind was blowing her around like a leaf.

The ground span dizzyingly below her. If she fell the force would wrench Gatti from the wall as well. The rope thrashed and coiled in the wind. The wind. That could be her only hope.

She tried to concentrate, waiting for a gust that would swing her in the right direction. A gust whipped past her again and she reached out...

Her hand brushed across the concrete lip and she caught hold and began to pull herself forward, pushing with her feet on the flat wall.

She collapsed on to the roof sobbing with relief, cradling her hands to her chest, trying to get some life back into them.

‘Ace!’ She could hear Gatti’s voice from below. ‘Ace, are you all right?’

Ace clambered to her feet. ‘Hang on!’

She fumbled with the rope around her waist, looking somewhere to anchor it. The flat roof was a jungle of air vent and aerials. A sturdy metal safety rail ran along the edge. Ace tied the rope to it, pulling hard to make sure it was secure.

She crossed back to the edge, taking up some of the slack.

‘OK Gatti. Unhook yourself and I’ll haul you up.’

‘Right.’ The rope jerked as Gatti released herself from the wall ‘Are

you ready?’

Ace braced her DMs on the lip of the roof and wound the rope around her palms. ‘Ready!’

The rope snapped taut as Gatti swung herself out and Ace winced as it cut into her palms. She started to ease her way backwards.

Gatti’s arm appeared over the lip, scrabbling desperately for a handhold. Ace tied off the rope and hurried over to her, catching hold of her hand and hauling her up on to the roof.

The two girls lay breathless for a moment. Gatti twisted her head, grinning at Ace. ‘You’re out of condition, girl.’

Ace punched her arm. ‘And you need to lose some weight.’

They got to their feet, the sprawl of the city stretching out as far as they could see all around them. A single wall of glass faced them. Lukos’s office.

Ace crossed to the glass, cupped her hands around her face and peered inside.

‘Anyone home?’ whispered Gatti.

Ace shook her head. ‘We’d have known about it if there was.’

Gatti looked along the expanse of glass. A sun lounge and a couple of chairs stood alongside a pair of huge glass doors.

She pulled at the doors. ‘Locked.’

‘Good.’ Ace lifted one of the patio chairs. ‘I’ve got some pent up aggression that needs to be worked off.’

She spun on the balls of her feet and hurled the chair at the window, Gatti ducked, covering her head as the sheet of glass shattered into a million pieces, the shards scattering over the roof and tumbling into the car park far below.

Staring incredulously at her friend, Gatti followed Ace into the office.

It was dark and empty. Papers swirled around the office, lifted from the vast desk by the wind. A huge holographic monitor hung in the middle of the room with Saarl’s exposé of the TARDIS still playing out on it. Ace crossed to the desk, her eyes scanning the complex controls.

‘One of these has got to be a communicator of some kind. Lukos has got to be in touch with those creatures that have got the Doctor.’

‘Bravo, my dear, bravo.’

Ace and Gatti spun round. The lights snapped on.

Lukos was ambling towards them, his podgy hands clapping. ‘You really are far more resourceful than I gave you credit for.’

‘You bastard.’ Ace started across the office towards him.

‘Oh, no, no, no.’ Lukos wagged a finger at her. ‘You’ve got this far, it would be a shame to get a bullet in you now.’

Trasker stepped from the shadows, her gun levelled at Ace’s head.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Commissionaire Reg Gurney slumped into the chair in his security office in despair. He’d been made a fool of, humiliated in front of his own men. Already he’d begun to see the smirks on the faces of the others, hear the whispers. His chain of command was ruined, his authority undermined.

Breame hadn’t helped. Stupid old fool. Reg knew that it had been a mistake keeping him on, letting him flaunt the regulations like that. His cellar office was a fire hazard and a security risk. They should have made him toe the line.

He gave a snort of disgust and let his tape gun clatter to the floor. What would the members of his old regiment think?

A stupid old man, playing at soldiers, outmanoeuvred by a mere girl. He stared at his reflection in the window. He was old. Too old to keep pretending any more. Desperately trying to keep the memories alive, desperately trying to convince the world that he was still useful, that he still had a part to play.

The scream cut across the night air, piercing and shrill.

Gurney was on his feet in a moment. He punched at the intercom.

‘Briggs! What’s going on man? Answer me!’

He peered at the security camera. The commissionaire was struggling with a figure at the main gate. It was dark and difficult to make out

what was happening. There was something wrong with the figure, something wrong with its face.

Briggs tore himself free and started to run. Gurney stared after him in disbelief. Deserting his post!

The figure turned and roared into the camera. Gurney recoiled in horror.

The creature started to shamle across the forecourt and Gurney snatched up his gun, his heart pounding.

This was it. After all these years he had a real crisis to deal with, a real danger. For too long he'd had to put up with abusive teenagers, unco-operative staff members. Now he had an invader, an alien that he could deal with in the way he had been trained.

He punched at a seldom-used control and the low drone of sirens filled the night air. He bellowed into the communicator.

'All commissionaires, report to the main gate immediately! I say again main gate immediately!'

Pulling on his cap, he flung open the door of his security booth. He could see his men, floundering and leaderless. He smiled. They couldn't cope. Didn't know how to deal with a real crisis. He would show them.

He started off across the tarmac, ducking out of the beams of the spotlights that lit up the towering studio complex.

He tucked the tape gun under his shoulder, squinting along the sight. The world started to fade around him. Suddenly he wasn't a head of security on a civilised world. He was Sergeant Reg Gurney of the Colonial Marines, in hostile surroundings, his platoon waiting for him, relying on him.

He narrowed his eyes. The creature showed no sign of having seen him. It was still making for the main doors. He signalled to his troops. Spread out, surround it. He started to creep forward. That was the art of jungle warfare. Keep to the shadows, use your camouflage, keep your enemy guessing.

He rolled through a cluster of shrubs and hurled himself to the ground, edging forward on his belly. He couldn't see the creature any more. Tricky customer. Knew the terrain too well.

He could hear someone calling his name.

He turned, his face flushing with anger. Briggs was trying to wave him back.

‘Chief! Come back. It’ll kill you!’

Idiot man. He could give their position away, make them an easy target for the enemy gunners. He would deal with Briggs back at the barracks.

Gurney struggled to his feet. He would have to act decisively, quickly. If the creature was alerted to their presence he would have to take it down before it had a chance to call for reinforcements.

He stepped out of the shrubbery, weapon raised.

The blow sent him sprawling on to his back. He hit the ground hard, gasping for breath, his heart pounding in his chest.

The creature loomed over him. Gurney struggled to concentrate. It had something dripping from its taloned hands, something wet and thick and dark.

Gurney’s vision started to blur. The jungle was becoming indistinct. He was cold. Still, the evac team would be here soon. They would get him back to the MASH unit, get him fixed up. He’d be out of the war, now, out of the war...

Briggs looked on in shock as the body of his chief slumped back on to the blood-soaked tarmac. The creature stood over Gurney, staring at its hands, as if unsure of what it had just done, then it turned and fled towards the main building.

Commissionaires swarmed out across the tarmac, crossing in silence to the fallen figure of Reg Gurney. He lay on his back, staring at the night sky, a serene smile on his face.

Briggs leant down, took the tape gun from his hands and laid it across his chest.

Commissionaire Rickett looked at him, pale faced.

‘Bloody hell.’

Ashby hauled open the door to the Channel 400 building and staggered into the corridor, blood dripping from his fingers.

He hadn't meant to kill that man, he hadn't, but this body was so unfamiliar to him, its strength so difficult to control.

He stumbled forward, shaking with anger and fear. Blindly he pushed through door after door.

Suddenly he was aware of eyes on him. Of the sharp intake of breath. He snatched his head up. Hundreds of frightened faces looked back at him. The audience, waiting patiently outside the studio, slowly turned, one by one. And then the screaming started.

Briggs and the other commissionaires had just made it to the top of the steps when the tide of humanity hit them. A stampede of terrified people pushed past, scattering them like skittles.

Briggs saw Rickett hurled backwards, tumbling down the steps in an untidy whirl of limbs. His head cracked on to the tarmac and he slumped unconscious.

Briggs started to bellow at the crowd, trying to restore some kind of order, but the rabble was hysterical and determined.

The screaming was deafening.

Briggs was swept away in the terrified tide.

Breame sat hunched over his desk picking the last remnants of red tape from his jacket. The stuff got everywhere, and it itched. He had recovered from his less-than-gentle handling at the hands of the security guards. Oh, how that Gurney loved his authority, He had taken great delight in reading the regulations.

Breame smiled. Not that they had got anything from him.

Oh no. The Master of the Questions was too clever for them.

In the end they had let him go, more out of frustration than anything else.

Another round to him.

Breame looked up from his desk as the screaming reached him.

He frowned. He was used to the roar of the crowd, but this... this was something different.

He got up from his desk. This was something new, something to



investigate.

As he reached the door it swung inwards, and a horrific shape shambled into the room.

Breame stared in puzzlement.

‘Well, well, well. I wonder what questions *you* are the answer to?’

Gatti caught hold of Ace’s arm as Trasker crossed to Lukas’s side.

‘He must be paying you a lot of money, Trasker.’ Ace’s voice was vicious.

Trasker shrugged. ‘Enough.’

‘Dear Rennie has such a sharp mind.’ Lukos stroked her hair. ‘It was her idea to just sit here and wait for you, while my commissionaires charged around like buffoons.’

‘How did you know?’ asked Ace.

Trasker smiled. ‘I know you almost as well as you know yourself. I’ve researched every facet of your character, delved into every nook and cranny of your past. Your loyalty to the Doctor dictated that you would try and rescue him from his predicament, and it was logical that you would eventually try and get to the man responsible for that predicament.’

She nodded at the shattered window. ‘I’ll give you credit for the way you got in. I didn’t think you’d have the guts for that.’

‘I’ll show you how much guts I’ve got,’ snarled Ace.

Trasker’s smile faded and the gun snapped back up.

Lukas prodded with his foot at the mess of papers littering the floor. ‘You really have made quite an atrocious mess.’ He sighed. ‘I’m really not sure that I can be bothered keeping you any more. You are becoming quite tiresomely expensive.’

‘You can’t just kill us,’ shouted Gatti.

‘Oh but I can!’ All playfulness had gone from Lukas’s voice now. ‘I’ve already showed the audience one grave.

Making that two graves will be simple, and filling those graves simpler

still.'

Ace whipped the piton gun from Gatti's backpack, aimed and fired. The piton materialised in Lukos's shoulder. He crashed to the floor, howling in agony.

'Kill her!' he bellowed, 'kill the bitch!'

Trasker's gun blazed. Another window shattered. Ace and Gatti tumbled behind the desk.

With a jarring chime the lift doors slid open and Gartrold Breame stepped out into the shattered office.

Trasker's gun swung around to cover him.

'Breame! Get out of here!' Ace waved frantically at him.

Breame waved theatrically. 'Ladies and gentlemen. A mystery guest star for you to identify. Familiar features hidden in a most unusual way. Can you guess who it is?'

He stepped to one side, gesturing at the open lift door.

A terrifying figure shambled into the light.

The Doctor stepped out on to the surface of Scrantek. He peered cautiously around, his eyes screwed up against the stinging grit. Tangled buildings littered the wind-ravaged landscape, curling against the lurid, brooding sky like fingers.

Amongst the buildings were spacecraft, huge rusting hulks, their innards scattered over the ash.

From below him in the vaults came the sound of battle.

Roars from creatures of every description echoed from the bottom of the staircase. This was getting messy.

The Doctor stepped out of the lee of the building and the full force of the wind hit him. He crept forward, eyes scouring the shadows for signs of pursuit. An eerie moan echoed around the ruined landscape. The wind, whistling through the shattered hulls of the thousands of ships, whirling the dust into huge billowing clouds. The Doctor could see shapes and designs that he recognised amongst the rusting corroded metal, evidence of how the Fleshsmiths had plundered the space lanes in their search for victims during years of butchery.

He staggered forward trying to find some shelter in the broken hulls of the ships. He pushed aside a curtain of flapping cables. The star cruiser was ripped and broken, circuitry scattered in ragged broken piles. The Doctor picked at complex electronic devices. Ships seemed to hold no interest for the Fleshsmiths. It was only their occupants they were interested in. Sentient beings reduced to no more than materials, a resource to be collected from the universe and used.

Ahead of him he could see the cathedral spire of the main complex – and the forge. Pulling his collar up, he stepped from the ragged shell of the starship and began to pick his way across the shattered plain. Every step of the way he kicked up clouds of ash that were whipped away by the screaming winds.

The Doctor started as a shape loomed from the choking clouds.

He relaxed. It was a monument, a scarred and crumbling stone monolith set amongst the coarse ash. He squinted through the howling winds. More towering shapes were visible through the gloom.

He stepped closer to the monument, his hand rubbing away the ash. Names were etched into the stone. Hundreds upon thousands of names. With a shock the Doctor realised that it was a monument to the dead of Scrantek.

The monoliths stretched away in a long avenue. Headstone for the population of an entire planet. The Doctor stood, silent, staring at the carved stones. The light from the distant nebula lit the landscape with weird dancing colours. He couldn't condone what the Fleshsmiths had become, but to know that your entire race was doomed. To know that nature was your enemy; what could that do to a people?

The universe had destroyed the people of Scrantek when it created the nebula, and in doing so it had spawned the Fleshsmiths. Now it was his job to finish what the universe had begun.

The Doctor pushed open the huge rotten door to the complex and slipped through the gap. Screams and moans echoed horribly around the dank and dripping walls. The hallway was empty. In the distance, above the pleas and cries, he could hear gunfire and explosions, and horrible triumphant howls. The Zzinbriizi finally had something to hunt, and they were enjoying their work.

The Doctor smiled grimly. Barrock was going to have his hands full dealing with his men's blood lust. Hopefully that would also keep the Fleshsmiths busy just long enough for him to be able to do what he

had to do. He frowned. The Master's disappearance was a concern. He was devious, ruthless. The Doctor shook his head. He would have to worry about the Master later. First he had to get to the forge, and that meant going through the flesh bank.

He crossed the chamber and pressed his eye to the crack between the double doors to the bank. He could see nothing through the writhing mist, nothing save for the bodies.

The Doctor steeled himself. He had seen many horrors in the universe, been presented with unspeakable cruelty, but he knew that the flesh bank of the Fleshsmiths would continue to haunt him for a long time to come. So many innocents in need of a saviour. So many innocents that he was totally unable to save. The best he could offer them was death, and there were already so many deaths on his conscience.

Steeling himself the Doctor pushed at the huge doors and stepped into the mist.

He crept forward, aware of hundreds of eyes swinging painfully towards him, aware of tortured throats trying to call out to him. In the distance he could see the dark cowed shapes of the Fleshsmiths, little more than shadows in the coiling vapour, shambling to and fro, tending to vital feeds and cables as their colleagues battled the Zzinbriizi far below in the vaults.

The Doctor skirted away from them, pushing deeper and deeper into the grotesque jungle of bodies, wasted limbs hanging like vines around him. The air was foul and cold and he pulled his jacket tighter around him.

A sudden dragging made him duck down, crouching on the wet gravel. Two of the Fleshsmiths slid past holding twisted ugly weapons in their hands. The Doctor could hear their low hissing voices.

An arm slumped down on to the Doctor's shoulder, a talon-like hand digging into the cloth. He pulled himself free, pushing away across the slick ground. His hearts pounded in his chest. His breath caught in his throat.

The two Fleshsmiths became hazy silhouettes. The Doctor let his breath out in a rush. He looked up. Above him a gaunt twisted figure reached out, its eyes pleading.

The Doctor backed away, shaking his head sadly. 'I'm sorry,' he whispered. 'I'm truly sorry.'

He turned and hurried off. His mouth was set in a grim line, his steel-grey eyes were blazing with anger. He pressed himself against the wall of the chamber, his eyes never straying from the far door, shutting out the hell around him.

This was going to be finished. Soon. The deceptions had gone on long enough. He had let himself be manipulated, used, but now it was time to finish it.

He reached the far door and stopped, listening. Tentatively he eased it open. Ahead of him was the forge, its giant machines snaking towards the ceiling. It was dark and empty, the background throb of machinery muted and soft. The Doctor slipped through the monumental machines like a ghost, his eyes flicking around at the slightest noise.

The DNA sequencer dominated the room, a huge mass of waist-thick pipes and vicious needles, like some huge baroque organ.

The Doctor stood in the shadows, staring up at it, then slipped through a dark arch into the base of the machine.

Ace choked back her revulsion. The creature was humanoid, but there was no way that it could ever be described as human.

The skin was raw and wet, thick pulsing cables winding back and forth across the body, plunging into flesh then bursting out again. Scars crisscrossed the face, pulling the skin tight around the gleaming camera eye. The other eye was human, constantly moving, full of pain and fear.

Ace backed away as the creature lurched into the office. It held out a clawed hand.

‘Ace...’ The voice was a gravelly whisper. ‘Help me.’

Ace peered at the ruined face. There was something familiar, something behind the scars and twisted flesh. The creature stumbled forward.

‘They did this to me.’ He turned towards Lukos. ‘He did this to me.’

Lukos was shaking with fear. He scrambled across the floor, clutching at his bleeding shoulder. ‘Shoot it Trasker! For God’s sake, Rennie, shoot it before it gets me.’

The creature swung round towards Trasker.

‘Rennie?’ There was pleading in the voice. ‘Rennie is that you?’

Trasker backed away, swinging the gun up. ‘Keep away from me.’

‘It’s me, don’t you remember?’

‘Your answers please, ladies and gentlemen. Only thirty seconds remaining.’ Breame’s voice echoed around the office.

‘Surely you remember.’

‘I told you to stay back!’ The gun roared.

The creature bellowed in pain, collapsing to its knees. It clutched at its chest, watching the blood trickle through its fingers. It looked up again. ‘They killed Eeji...’

‘Oh, what a clue!’ burred Breame. ‘Surely you can get it now! One-time partner of the Monteekean called Eeji Tek, leading light of the independent sector, ex-boyfriend of Rennie Trasker...’

Recognition flooded over Ace. She felt sick. ‘Greg?’

Gatti screamed.

Trasker covered her mouth in horror. ‘Oh God, no.’ The gun slipped from her fingers. ‘Greg... ?’

The creature that had been Greg Ashby reached out with crooked hands, its mouth twisting horribly as it tried to force out words, then it collapsed into the spreading pool of blood.

Trasker sank to her knees. Ace swept the gun up from the floor, but Trasker just sat staring at the body of her old lover, twisted beyond recognition by the Fleshsmiths.

Slowly she turned to Lukos. ‘You did this?’

Lukos held up his hands, ‘I didn’t know. I thought they’d killed him.’

‘And that’s better?’ Trasker’s voice was a shriek. ‘How many other have been butchered for your ratings you animal!’

With a scream she launched herself at Lukos. Ace and Gatti caught her, holding her back as she tore at them.

‘I’m going to kill him.’

‘No,’ said Ace. ‘That’s my job.’

The Doctor stepped from the base of the DNA sequencer, wiping his hands on the tatters of his jacket.

There was a soft chuckle from the darkness. The Master.

The Doctor squinted into the gloom. ‘Do I take it that you have managed to extricate yourself from our Zzinbriizi friends without any help from me, then?’

The Master stepped into a pool of light, immaculate and elegant, his dark eyes twinkling with amusement.

‘You really aren’t looking your best, Doctor.’

‘I’ll survive.’

The Master shook his head. ‘I don’t think so, I’m afraid.’

The lights came on. The Doctor shaded his eyes, dazzled by the glare. All around him the Fleshsmiths shambled forward hissing angrily.

The Master chuckled darkly. ‘Our friends were concerned about your wellbeing. They were worried that you wouldn’t get your moment of fame.’

The Doctor stared levelly at him. ‘So after everything, it comes down to this. Simple betrayal.’

The Master shrugged his shoulders. ‘They offered a proposition, Doctor. My help in capturing you...’

‘In return for your new body.’

‘Precisely. I knew you would head here. I’m delighted to say that you have acted precisely to plan.’

‘I’m delighted that I’ve been so predictable.’

The surgeon general shuffled forward. ‘You have been an unwanted irritation, Time Lord.’

The Doctor gave a mock bow. ‘It’s a habit. You won’t be the first murderous dictator that I’ve irritated.’

‘Well, I might be the last.’

The surgeon general punched at his control box and the Doctor collapsed in agony.

Lukos backed away as Ace strode across the office. Her face was hard and grim and the muzzle of the piton gun never wavered from his forehead.

He stumbled over his chair. ‘Now, my dear, I know you’re angry...’

‘Shut up.’ Ace could hear the tremor in her voice. The anger she felt was frightening her. All she wanted to do was pull the trigger and put a piton through that fat, balding head.

She wanted to see Lukos dead. She felt sick to her stomach, could feel the gun trembling in her hand.

She reached out with her other hand to steady it.

‘How do we stop this? Where are you holding the Doctor?’

Lukos shook his head. ‘He’s not on this planet. He’s on Scrantek. There’s nothing I can do...’

Ace pressed the gun against his forehead, forcing him back in his seat. ‘You’d better be lying or they’re going to need someone else to collect the licence fee around here.’

Lukos was deathly pale, the sweat beading on his brow.

‘Believe me, if I could stop it I would, but they’re going to go live at any moment. The final episode. The death of the Doctor.’

Ace stared at the screen in horror. Saarl was flouncing around the police-box shape of the TARDIS. An announcer was counting down. The Doctor’s agonised face faded on to the screen.

‘No!’ Ace screamed.

The Doctor’s head arched back in agony as a thousand needles sank into his flesh. He was stretched out on a bed in the DNA sequencer. Pipes started to pulse with blood. The background throb of the machinery was rising in pitch.

The surgeon general stood at the balcony of the control gallery, his human eye blazing with triumph as he stared at the writhing figure



before him. The Master was at his shoulder, staring impassively down at his old foe. The surgeon general turned, holding out a weeping, crusted hand, turning it over in the flickering light.

‘To have clean flesh, endlessly renewed. You cannot know what that means.’

The Master glanced at the cryogenic tube containing his new body. ‘I have more idea than you think,’ he murmured. The surgeon general peered into his eyes. ‘You feel no remorse, no regret at what you have done?’

The Master leant on the balcony, staring into the forge.

‘The Doctor and I have fought for as long as I can remember.

It always had to end with one of us dead.’ He smiled. ‘I had always anticipated that it should not be me.’

The surgeon general turned. All around the gallery figures were hunched over read-outs.

‘Are our transmitters on Blinni-Orkos fully primed?’

‘Everything is at full power, Surgeon General. The Channel 400 mainframe indicates that we have achieved maximum potential!’

‘Then our time has come.’

The clawed hand slammed down on the main power button.

As Ace watched, the machinery pulsed with power. The Doctor’s back bent like a bow, his scream echoing around the office, then he slumped back into the machinery, lifeless.

Ace screwed up her eyes, trying to shut out the scene.

‘Shut it off.’ Her voice was little more than a whisper.

Lukos scrabbled for the controls. ‘I... I...’

‘Shut up!’ Ace grasped him by the collar and hauled him away from the desk.

Lukos was pale and shaking. ‘They really didn’t leave me with any choice...’

‘I said shut up!’ Ace lashed out with the butt of her gun, sending Lukos sprawling. He crashed to the floor, whimpering, rubbing at the blood running from his cut lip.

Gatti made to move forward but Breame caught her arm, shaking his head. ‘Let this game play to its conclusion.

There’s nothing that you can do.’

Lukos was trying to haul himself away from Ace, his perfectly manicured fingernails scrabbling on the polished wood, blood from his wounded shoulder splashing on the floor. Ace raised the piton gun and thumbed a stud on its side.

The gun’s motor span into life. She crouched down, staring Lukos in the face. ‘You’ve made my best friend into little more than a puppet, you’ve put him in a maze and tortured and tormented him for nothing other than your entertainment.’

She placed the gun on Lukos’s forehead.

‘Ace, no.’ Gatti’s voice was trembling. Ace didn’t look around.

‘He’s a monster, Gatti, and the Doctor and I have always fought monsters.’ She could feel the tears starting to roll down her face. She pressed the gun forward, forcing Lukos’s head against the floor.

‘You have paraded me in front of your audience like some kind of toy, made me face up to things that no one should ever have to face. You have humiliated me, tried to break me, torn away everything that I ever believed in. You have tried your best to destroy my life, but guess what, Lukos?’ She smiled thinly. ‘I’m still standing, you’ve failed and I’m going to be the last thing t you ever see.’

Her finger started to tighten on the trigger.

The surgeon general stretched his arms wide, a horrible smile stretched across his scarred face.

‘Immortality, at last.’

Saarl held up the key, a lecherous smile on his lips.

‘The secrets of the Time Lords ladies and gentlemen. A TARDIS, a technological absurdity from an ancient and powerful race, revealed for you here, live, on the Roderik Saarl show!’

He slipped the key into the lock.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

An alarm went off.

The surgeon general struggled around, his smile fading.

‘What is the matter? What is wrong?’

Technicians struggled frantically with controls. ‘We have a system error. Something is infecting the machine.’

The background throb of the machinery was getting erratic, fading in and out. A dull shudder shook the gallery.

The Master grasped hold of the railing.

‘The Doctor,’ he hissed.

There was another thump from below them and a console exploded in a sheet of flame. The Master staggered to the surgeon general’s side. ‘Disconnect the Doctor from the machine.’

The surgeon general shook himself free, eyes blazing.

‘No! He is all that stands between us and extinction!’

‘He is causing that extinction!’ bellowed the Master.

‘Look.’

Down below in the forge the Doctor’s body was bubbling, dissolving. The DNA sequencer gave a deep wrenching groan.

Gouts of flame erupted from the machinery, fireballs rolling towards the ceiling.

‘That isn’t the Doctor!’ The Master staggered to the control console. ‘He’s tricked us. Tricked me!’ His hands danced over the complex controls, trying to stabilise the disruption.

The surgeon general shambled to another console. ‘Our transmitters! Our equipment on Blinni-Orkos! Quickly before we lose power completely.’

The technician shook a scarred head. ‘All readings at danger level,

Surgeon General. We cannot control the chain reaction.'

'No!' The surgeon general thrust the technician aside. 'We must have new flesh!'

He punched at the transmitter controls.

The transmitter tower exploded, a silent emption of oranges and yellows, the colours momentarily making the distant colours of the Brago nebula seem muted and soft.

Slowly the massive structure began to topple, metal twisting and buckling. Crackling ribbons of energy danced wildly across the airless surface of the moon as the Fleshsmith machinery torn apart. With a final plume of dust the tower crashed to the floor, another explosion tearing through it, sending shrapnel tumbling over and over into the void.

Saarl stared in disbelief through the open door of the TARDIS.

It was a shabby collection of timber and fibreglass, the light on roof lit by nothing more than a heavy vehicle battery. A prop, scenic construction.

The audience started to laugh and boo. Saarl barely even he the announcement that they were off the air. He slumped to knees, the jeers of the audience ringing around him.

The Master punched at the Fleshsmith machinery in frustration. 'This is futile. He has infected your entire planetary infrastructure. It's too late to stop it.'

Another distant explosion shook the control room. He clambered out of his seat. 'Time for me to leave, I believe.'

Around him the Fleshsmiths were desperately trying to regain control.

The Master smiled. 'Always one step ahead, Doctor.'

He crossed to the cryogenic tube. The body was all that w important now. To install it within his TARDIS and download his consciousness via the telepathic circuits. The Fleshsmiths and their machines had served their purpose. He no longer had any need of them.

He placed his hand on the glass of the cryogenic cocoon.

The face on the figure inside was pale and serene. A neat beard

bordered the thin line of the mouth. It was like looking back through time, looking back to how he had once been. 'A new body, at last.'

A drawn-out scream of pain made him spin round. The Fleshsmiths were doubled over, their scarred bodies twisting in agony. The fleshy pipes that linked them to their machines were swelling, distorting. As the Master watched the pipes burst, flooding the floor with thick black ichor.

The surgeon general staggered forward, his arms outstretched. His skin was drooping, sliding from his bones, his features were starting to liquefy. He gave a horrible gurgling cry. 'Help us. You must disconnect the Doctor's body from the machine.'

The Master started to back away in horror. The Fleshsmiths were dissolving, melting, their engineered flesh boiling away. The background throb of the machinery was drowned out by their screams.

The surgeon general reached out with skeletal hands. The Master lashed out, sending him tumbling backwards. Choking back his bile, the Master grasped the cryogenic cocoon. His face went pale.

'No!'

Inside the cocoon his perfect new body was dissolving, bubbling, decaying as he watched.

'NO!'

The Master scrabbled desperately for the cables linking the cocoon to the Fleshsmith machines. Fluid splattered over his hands, the flesh of his new body liquefying and splashing across the bloodstained floor.

'You will die as surely as us, Time Lord.' The surgeon general gave a bubbling cackle.

Eyes blazing with hatred the Master span round, bellowing over the noise of the explosions. 'Damn you, Doctor!' He reeled as more explosions shook the forge.

There was a bestial howl from the doorway and the Master turned to see Barrock looming in the doorway. But this was not the Barrock they had last seen. The jackal was hunched and twisted, claws scratching at the stone floor, drool splattering from his lips. His mouth twisted in agony, his brow was creased with the pain. 'Slipping... away. All...

going.’ He loped forward, eyes blazing. ‘Kill... you ... for what you...

did.’

The Master backed away. The surgeon general tried to struggle to his feet but his limbs were soft, crumbling.

‘Barrock...’

The Zzinbriizi launched himself across the room, all the trappings of civilisation drained from him, destroyed as the Fleshsmith machinery burned. Razor claws slashed out and the surgeon general disintegrated into a tangle of decaying flesh.

The Master stared around in horror. The Fleshsmiths were gone. They were nothing more than a thick ooze lapping at his boots. He started to back out of the control gallery. There was a snarl from behind him. From out of the shadows the Zzinbriizi surrounded him.

A hand reached out and took the piton gun from Ace.

‘I think that I’ll hang on to that, if you don’t mind.’

Ace looked up through tear-stained eyes. Tired, dirty, his face ashen, the Doctor smiled down at her. Ace shook her head wearily.

‘Another trick? Another stage trick?’

The Doctor helped her to her feet, putting an arm around her shoulders. ‘No Ace, no trick. Not this time.’

‘But you died. I saw you.’

‘A stunt double. A copy. A clone manufactured in the forge of the Fleshsmiths.’

Gatti ran over and Ace collapsed into her arms. The Doctor regarded the piton gun solemnly, then slipped it into his pocket. In a corner Trasker was sobbing silently, hunched over the broken body of Greg Ashby. Lukos was curled up, whimpering.

‘Your little bid for power is over, Mr Lukos, your allies will be dead by now.’

The Doctor’s voice was harsh. Lukos looked at him with frightened eyes.

‘What are you going to do with me?’

‘What indeed.’ The Doctor’s eyes were steely grey, reflecting the static in the monitor screen. ‘You know Mr Lukos, I really don’t think that enough care has been taken over my foray into television. Oh, without doubt your sordid little adventure has had spectacular sets, stunning effects, and the performances have been first class, but it lacked soul.’

He knelt down. ‘You have missed the point, Mr Lukos.

You have put glitz and glamour and violence in place of meaning, and substance. I live my life in my own way, and I won’t be forced into a mould that someone else thinks I should be fitted into. I cannot be standardised, or compartmentalised, or Hollywoodised. I will not be written against type or censored. In short, I am a broadcasting phenomenon. There is nothing else like me. I am unique, and you haven’t handled me properly.’

He snatched the remote control from Lukos’s hand and stabbed at the buttons. ‘I am cancelling this show, Mr Lukas.

Taking myself off the air, indefinitely.’

The screens went dead.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

‘Magnificent control, perfect timing. Keep your audience guessing right to the end!’

Breame was giddy with excitement, his pen dancing across the page of his notebook. ‘So many unanswered questions though Doctor, and as a professional setter of riddles and clues I really must know everything.’

The Doctor, Ace and Breame were back at Gatti’s house.

The Rooths were almost beside themselves. There hadn’t been a single broadcast from Channel 400 all day. Finally, in frustration, Gatti had shooed her family out into the garden.

The Doctor was perched on the edge of a rocking chair.

Ace was curled up asleep on the sofa. The Doctor looked at her with concern in his eyes. She had been through a lot, more than usual. He needed to talk to her, but here was not the place, now not the time.

‘Doctor, please!’ Breame was getting excited.

‘All right, Me Breame, all right.’ The Doctor waved him into silence.

‘The possibility that the Master was going to betray me to the Fleshsmiths had always been in my mind. From the moment I learnt that the DNA sequencer was capable of producing clones I had the idea for my double. A short-lived golem that would draw attention away from me. My problem was always how to get in there undetected by either the Master or the cameras.’

‘So you used the Zzinbriizi to provide the perfect diversion.’ Gatti emerged from the kitchen with coffees.

‘Precisely. Releasing the animals from their pens presented the jackals with an irresistible target, and in the confusion I was able to slip away and create the clone.’

‘Leaving the clone to get captured.’

The Doctor nodded and sipped at his coffee.

‘But what about your return here, the substitution of the fake TARDIS?’

‘Really, Mr Breame, I would have thought that was obvious. With my clone captured I was able to reach the Master’s TARDIS undetected and get to my own. The substitute TARDIS has been in the field for days, I swapped it for a fake police box before Ace and I even tried our first break-in. The real TARDIS has been safely hidden in an empty office block in the centre of town. Once I had reached my own ship and returned the Master’s TARDIS to Scrantek, it was simply a question of watching and waiting.’

‘So you saw everything that Ace went through, you knew what was going on here, and did nothing to help?’ Gatti’s tone was accusing.

The Doctor looked sheepish. ‘Well, I had to keep out of the way to ensure that my copy was forced into the DNA sequencer. Besides, I took another detour to the moon, just in case things went wrong.’ He dropped a piece of equipment on to the table. ‘A power-limiter. The transmitters on Blinni-Orkos are liable to be scrap metal by now.’

Breame opened his mouth to ask another question. The Doctor held up his hands. ‘The copy was short-lived and unstable, loaded with an unravelling DNA sequence that set up a cascade effect in the Fleshsmiths’ machinery.’ He peered sadly into his coffee cup. ‘It set up an infection throughout their entire planetary infrastructure,



destroying them and the poor individuals that they had stored in their flesh bank.'

Gatti laid a hand on his arm. 'Who you've already told us you couldn't have saved.'

The Doctor smiled sadly. 'Yes, but that doesn't make it any easier.' He got up and stared out into the garden.

'Your father seems to be having trouble with the flowerbeds.'

Gatti peered through the window. The incongruous shape of the TARDIS stood amongst the rose bushes. 'It's nice to see him doing anything at all.'

The Doctor put his coffee cup down and rolled up the sleeves of his jacket. 'It's going to be a while before Ace wakes tip, I'll go and give him a hand. I've got quite green fingers, even if I say so myself.'

Vogol Lukos shuffled over to the lift and pressed the button.

The machinery whirled into life.

All around him the studio went about its everyday business. A tide of engineers had descended on the building, checking the transmitters, putting in new connections. There had been a steady stream of shuttles from the docks to the moon all day, repairing the transmitter tower.

All this meant nothing to Lukos. It wasn't his company any more. Treeb had taken over. Voted in by the other members of the board of governors. An internal enquiry was due to take place in the next few days.

The lift arrived and Lukos stepped into it and was whisked to his office in moments. He stepped out into the silence. The room was dark. He waved his hand over the light sensor.

Nothing. Lukos frowned.

'Auntie? Lights please.'

There was no reply from the computer. There was a soft chuckle from the darkness. 'It would appear that even the computer doesn't recognise your authority any more.'

Lukos squinted into the darkness. 'Who is that?'

There was a dark shape behind the desk. 'Treeb, is that you?'

Lukos crossed the office, his anger mounting. The man could take over his company, take over his studios, but this was his office and that was his desk.

'This is outrageous.'

The lights came on with shocking suddenness. Lukos recoiled in surprise.

Behind the desk was the Master, leaning back in the chair, fingers steepled, a trace of a smile flickering behind his beard.

Lukos gripped the edge of the desk for support. 'What do you want here?' he whispered.

'Me?' The Master's face was a mask of surprise. 'Oh, I want nothing, Me Lukos, but my new friends decided they had one last duty to perform, a contractual obligation, and I wasn't about to stand in their way.'

Lukos backed away. 'Friends?'

'Old friends of yours too, I believe, though they're not as...

sophisticated as they used to be.'

Lean shadows detached themselves from the corners of the office, mangy loping shapes, their breath harsh and rasping.

'Barrock? Barrock listen to me.' Lukos's voice was pleading. There was nothing in the face of the Zzinbriizi, nothing but pure animal hatred.

'I'm afraid that they have nothing of the intelligence they once had,' purred the Master, lifting a decanter from Lukos's desk and sniffing at the contents. 'It's only by hypnotism that I have any power over them at all.' He poured the wine into a glass. 'But they do still have a strong memory.'

He poured the deep red wine into an elegant glass.

'They seem to be angry with you, Me Lukos. Very angry.'

Lukos turned to run. In seconds the pack was on him. The Master's lips curled back, revealing cruelly pointed teeth. He raised his wine glass.

‘Bon appetit.’

The Doctor knocked tentatively on Ace’s door, then pushed it open.

She was sitting at a writing desk, pasting photographs into an album. The Doctor sat on the edge of the bed. He reached across, taking one of the photographs. Him in London, during the Blitz.

Ace held up a photograph of herself from Iceworld. ‘It’s funny, Professor. I take these as a reminder, of a moment in time that will never come again, because time moves on. But when you see something of your own future, it still comes as a shock.’

‘Ace...’

‘I’ve seen my own death, Professor. Even more than seeing what happens to my mum, that frightens me. That I’m going to die before I see her again.’

The Doctor closed the album, staring into her eyes. ‘It wasn’t real, Ace. An illusion created by Lukos, a trick for the audience.’

Ace stared back at him, uncertainty in her eyes. ‘You can’t know that, Professor. You can’t know everything.’

The Doctor looked hurt. ‘I thought I did! Are you telling me I’m not perfect?’

Ace smiled. ‘You’ll do.’

‘The people at Channel 400 were evil, manipulating the truth for their own ends. Just because you’ve seen something on a screen doesn’t mean that it’s true.’

‘If you say so, Professor.’

The Doctor tapped the tip of her nose. ‘Trust me.’

Annie Halfrace groaned as the noise of another argument drifted from the bar. She looked up from her accounts. One of her barmaids was struggling to dissuade another drunken lout from having another drink.

She could see from here that the man had had enough. He could barely keep himself upright. Annie closed her ledger with a sigh. They didn’t need this. Not now. Since the television station had been off the air, business had been booming. It looked like being her most

profitable month yet.

She slid from the booth and pushed her way through the jumble of drinkers.

‘How dare you refuse to sherve me?’ The man was getting angry now. Annie grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

‘Is there a problem here?’

‘There shertainy ish.’ The man tried to pull himself upright, leaning unsteadily on the bar. ‘Thish young lady refushes to give me a drink.’

He tried to focus on Annie, his head weaving.

Annie glanced over at the bar. A dozen empty glasses stood on the counter.

‘Foamasi brandy?’

The barmaid nodded.

Annie turned back to the drunk. ‘Then I think you’ve had enough. Out.’

The man swiped at her with a huge hand. ‘How dare you.

Do you know who I am?’

‘I don’t give a toss.’ Annie nodded at her bouncer. The huge Ogron lumbered over, picking up the drunk by the collar.

He kicked out feebly. ‘But I’m important I tell you,’ he slurred. ‘I’m Roderik Shaarl.’

‘Yeah, and I’m the empress of Draconia.’ Annie shook her head and went back to her paperwork. ‘Throw him out, Baz.’

The Ogron hoisted Saarl into the air and carried him to the door.

Commissionaire Briggs looked up from his bar meal and stared after him. ‘You know, he did look kind of familiar.’

Rickett patted his arm. ‘Don’t believe a word of it, sunshine. In this town everyone thinks they’re a television star.’

Outside in the gutter Saarl struggled to get back on to his feet.

A gust of wind swirled newspapers around him. He looked down. An advertisement loomed from one of the pages.

*‘The show of the century! Catch Roderick Saarl tonight and every night, live from Blinni-Gaar, only on Channel 400!’*

Saarl looked at it solemnly for a moment, then slumped back into the gutter and began to laugh and laugh and laugh.

## Tag Scene

The fog that carpeted the graveyard coiled around the base of the TARDIS. An owl hooted mournfully.

As if in reply the TARDIS began to groan and wheeze, the flashing light on its roof sending long shadows dancing through the gravestones. The fog swirled and boiled as the dark-blue shape of the police box began to fade into insubstantiality. In seconds it was gone and silence and darkness settled over the graveyard once more.

Inside the TARDIS the Doctor’s hands flitted over the myriad tiny controls. He was caked in mud, and a filthy trail was splattered across the floor.

The Doctor pulled his handkerchief from his pocket, wiping his hands, then shrugged off his jacket and let it fall to the floor. The shovel was leaning against the hat stand. The Doctor picked it up then crossed to the interior door.

The corridors of the time machine were dim, the hum of complex machinery nothing but a soft background murmur.

The TARDIS equivalent of night. The Doctor padded softly over to the door of Ace’s room and eased it open, peering into the darkened room. Ace was curled up in her bed, her face calm, her breathing slow and measured. The Doctor smiled.

She was exhausted. He would let her sleep late. After all they had been through they both deserved a rest.

He closed the door gently and set off along the twilight corridor. He walked for a long time, winding gently deeper and deeper into the bowels of his ship. Eventually he came to a heavy wooden door, incongruous amongst the gleaming roundels. The Doctor pulled a huge old-fashioned key from his pocket, looking back over his shoulder to check that the corridor was empty. He placed the key in

the lock and turned it. The door creaked open and the Doctor slipped inside.

He closed the door, leaning the shovel against the wall. In the centre of the room was the coffin. The Doctor stood for a moment, his back against the door, staring. The room was lit by flickering candlelight. He crossed to the coffin. On the floor beside it was the headstone. He let his hands run over the cold stone. *To the memory of Dorothy Gale. A seasoned travel who has embarked upon the greatest adventure.*

The Doctor pulled over a chair and sat down.

There was no doubting it. This was no sick joke by the journalists of Vogol Lukas. He had already checked the body inside the coffin. Ace. Dead. Not old, young, as she was now.

Young and dead. He hadn't foreseen this. He, the great manipulator, the one who always prided himself on being one step ahead, hadn't had the faintest notion that this was coming.

He took a deep breath, resting his chin in his hands. He had gone looking for the grave as soon as Ace had fallen asleep, determined to find out the truth for himself. Now that he had, he didn't have the faintest idea what to do. He had lost too many people, been responsible for too many deaths.

Katarina, Sara, Adric.

He clenched his fists. 'Not again.'

He stood up and made a circuit of the room, blowing out the candles, then crossed to the door and stepped out into the corridor.

He looked back at the dark shape of the coffin, wreathed in candle smoke, then pulled the door shut and locked it.

'Not this one.'

This was one battle he had to win, but this time his enemy was Time itself. Tucking the key deep into his pocket, the Doctor started the long walk back to the console room.

About the Author

Mike Tucker is an effects designer with the BBC Visual Effects department. He has worked on a wide variety of television

programmes including *Red Dwarf*, *999*, *Casualty* and, of course, *Doctor Who*. His writing career began with the behind-the-scenes book *Ace!*, which he co-wrote with Sophie Aldred, and he has subsequently written three *Doctor Who* novels with long-time writing partner Robert Perry. *Prime Time* is his first solo writing project.

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